

ABSTRACT

Who Do You Say I Am?:
African American Women Clergy
and the Construction of Ministerial Identity

by

Natasha Jamison Gadson

Date: May 2, 2016

Approved:

Dr. Mary McClintock Fulkerson

Dr. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Supervisor

Dr. David L. Odom

Dr. David L. Odom, Second Reader

Craig Hill

Dr. Craig Hill, D.Min. Director

An abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
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The purpose of this study was to examine how African American women in ordained ministry construct and develop ministerial identity in the context of the Black Church. This study employed a qualitative multicase study methodology and the purposive participant sample was comprised of 13 women who were ordained or pursuing ordination in the Baltimore or Washington conferences of the AME Church. Semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants, and member checks were employed as a triangulation method. This study reveals that the primary factor impacting ministerial identity development is the relationship with the senior pastor and explores the various ways in which that impact is felt. This study also connects aspects of that relationship and its resulting impact to African American cultural traditions and values, as well as offers several suggestions to women cultivating ministerial identity and the organizational systems within which that process occurs.

Dedication

For the preaching women who went before me without the benefit of acknowledgement or recognition and on whose broad shoulders I stand.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The African-American church has remained “one of the few cohesive institutions to emerge out of slavery.”¹ Historically the church has been the institution that draws people together within the black community across class and economic lines. For generations the church has been central to the black community, serving not only as the basis for values, beliefs, and cultural norms, but also as a training ground. This institution has allowed its people an opportunity to sharpen their skills in areas where the secular world may not allow them to serve. Many gifted people have developed their leadership skills within this platform, allowing them to launch into successful careers in the church and in other areas of the black community.² Many have even found success in creating and sustaining profitable businesses because the church offered an opportunity for the exchange of ideas and resources among its members.

In addition, the Black Church has had to work to meet social needs such as homelessness, unemployment, and poverty through its missionary initiatives. Committed to addressing educational and economic concerns, black churches have developed a range of initiatives from after school programs to home ownership seminars. One can canvas the churches in any given black community and see that collectively and individually, black churches have largely remained committed to their charge to address the needs of the people. The Black Church has been and continues to be “the single most autonomous institution in North America, one that has historically played a major role in response to

¹ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 7.

² *Ibid.*

social, political, and cultural changes within black communities and their relationship to broader society.”³

With all of its influence and activity in the community, the Black Church’s foremost objective continues to be to build and strengthen the faith of its people. While religion in general regardless of race or culture has its basis in the encounter between humans and the divine, the cultural construct within which this encounter takes place cannot be ignored. For American Christians of African descent, ‘faith’ has largely been rooted in the notion of a God who is a liberating and avenging champion of God’s people. The formidable image of divine rescuer pervasively colors the theological lenses of both black preaching and its hearers. Faith provides a direct link to freedom, as it does for others, however specific to the Black Church is how “freedom” is conceptualized. Faith offers more than simply freedom from sin or the individualistic view of freedom to pursue destiny. Rather the freedom that comes by faith is communal in nature, speaking to liberation from bondage as well as inspiring a release into all forms of justice including economical, political, and social. Freedom has consistently been the supreme worth of the black cosmos.⁴

The usage of the term “the Black Church” follows a tradition that began with classical African American scholars and endures to the present day. The term is not intended to suggest that collectively churches with predominantly African American congregations are a monolith, singular in thought and praxis. Lincoln and Mamiya note that many scholars and much of the public in general use the term “as a kind of

³ Floyd-Thomas, Juan, et al., *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 106.

⁴ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 4-5.

theological shorthand reference to the pluralism of black Christian churches in the United States.”⁵ One therefore should not mistake the usage of the term as indicative of a limited perception of predominantly African American congregations and denominations. On the contrary, the usage of the phrase “the Black Church” speaks to the rich multiplicity of expressions of Black Christian religiosity which is “comprised of recognized cultural traditions and practices that have contributed, in historical and contemporary contexts, to the development of Black community life.”⁶ While honoring the plethora of the characteristics that can be attributed to the many iterations of the Black Church by refraining from painting all black congregations with the same brush stroke, a number of characteristics can be highlighted as prevalent among most predominantly African American worshipping bodies. One such characteristic is the role of the pastor.

The Role of the Pastor in the Black Church

One of the most prominent attributes that differentiates African American congregations from most others is the amount of influence and power entrusted to the pastor. George Barna and Harry Jackson note that the deference and respect shown to the pastor by members tends to leave a “startling impression” on white pastors upon visiting black churches.⁷ In general, pastors are highly regarded by their members; a sentiment that is demonstrated through church protocols and informed by cultural traditions. One such protocol dictates that nothing concerning the church happens without the knowledge and/or permission of the pastor. From the selection of Sunday morning program participants to the preaching engagements and other outside ministry activities of the

⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶ Floyd-Thomas, Juan, *Black Church Studies*, 99.

⁷ George Barna and Harry Jackson, *High Impact African American Churches* (Ventura, California: Regal Books), 21.

associate ministers, everything must be approved by the pastor or the one to whom he or she has designated that authority. This includes all administrative, liturgical, and congregational concerns of the church. Yet pastors may potentially exercise varying levels of control based on congregation and staff size as well as preferred leadership style. Depending on how the worshipping body is organized as it relates to bylaws and denomination, leadership components may have a voice, but generally the pastor heavily influences all final decisions. Barna and Jackson assert that the authority given is expected to be used because of the congregation's reliance on the pastor to take them where they otherwise would not be able to go.⁸ In addition to authority, pastors in a black church context are generally extended certain courtesies based upon cultural traditions. For example the pastor is usually assigned an armor bearer,⁹ is usually not openly and publicly challenged, and is never addressed informally by his or her members.¹⁰ Even in instances where members do not agree with the decisions of the pastor or in cases where the pastor's leadership is questionable, members largely believe in the principle that they are to honor the "office of the pastor" regardless of their feelings for the person who holds that office.

To some the authority and courtesies automatically extended to pastoral leadership may appear extreme when perhaps they are miniscule in light of the level of expectation African American congregations place on their leadership. Contemporary

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ An armor bearer's function is to provide assistance in smaller tasks (i.e. parking the car, carrying bags, etc.), but may also provide security to the pastor particularly in larger churches. The armor bearer's most important responsibility is spiritual, and that is to be in continual prayer for the pastor. This stems from the belief that the pastor's assignment is to carry the word for the people on God's behalf, thereby making the pastor the target of demonic attack. See *Called Alongside* Pamela Smith

¹⁰ Church members almost never address their pastor by his or her first name without a title attached, much the same way students matriculating at HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities) do not address their professors in such a familiar manner.

societal expectations suggest that pastors are to be chief executive officers, church growth specialists, and counselors in addition to being resident theologians.¹¹ These expectations are further augmented, and perhaps nuanced in complicated ways, when considered in conjunction with the particular challenges faced by African Americans. Pastors of black churches are expected to function in a number of roles that have tremendous impact in the lives of the congregational members, collectively and individually. These roles go beyond the traditional expectation that clergy visit the sick and bury the dead, but extend to the existential plight of a people who are navigating through a matrix of discriminatory structures daily.

Agent of Nurture

Pastors are expected to be agents of nurture. The term ‘nurture’ conjures up images of activities that are life-sustaining, enriching, and nourishing. Likewise nurture as it relates to the African American worship experience can be likened to a nursing mother who provides food and nourishment. Stacy Floyd-Thomas et al. offer an incarnational theological perspective of nurture by suggesting it is “provided through the caring presence and activity of God in Jesus Christ, often mysteriously in the sacramental activity of worship and concretely in the care shown by the pastor and others.”¹² This understanding connects nurture to the ministry that is concretely provided to the people in times of crisis in the form of concern, attention, and physical presence. The pastor becomes an agent of nurture by impressing upon the congregation the importance of their role and responsibility as believers in Jesus Christ to be vessels of nurture for others. He

¹¹ John E. Johnson, “The Old Testament Offices as a Paradigm for Pastoral Ministry,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152, (1995): 182.

¹² Floyd Thomas, et. al, 179.

or she communicates and grounds theologically the worshipping community's call to serve as "resources in the healing, guiding, sustaining, and reconciling functions of nurture and to follow through with the pastor's task as pastoral caregiver and counselor outside the worship context when necessary."¹³

Edward Wimberly draws a direct connection between nurture and the type of environment the pastor must intentionally work to create. In the nurturing process, the pastor must create an environment of concern and care. Wimberly also suggests that the pastor must create an environment that enables worshipers to sing and to pray as well as one that keeps the needs of the community in mind.¹⁴ Presumably the pastor must be intentional in the creation of such an environment by demonstrating the kind of care and concern for the people and the community that she endeavors to engender among the congregation. He would have to demonstrate the capacity to be relational and not only interested in the lives of other people, but willing to get involved to a reasonable degree in order to bring about change for others. One could argue that the same holds true for worship. In order to cultivate an environment where the people feel free to worship in song and prayer, the pastor must model and exemplify that kind of liberty. Lastly Wimberly asserts that through the use of proclamation and scripture, the pastor must inspire the kind of courage and strength that allows those in crisis to navigate their challenges.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 196.

¹⁴ Edward Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008) 36.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Interpreter

Closely related to the role of the pastor as agent of nurture, and perhaps the vehicle by which that role is accomplished, is the pastor's role as interpreter. Through the proclaimed word, the pastor as interpreter assumes the task of "weaving the human and the divine narratives into a single web."¹⁶ The pastor's proclamation brings the Gospel to bear upon the lives of the people; which is to say that it serves the purpose of helping the people to make sense of their lives in light of the Gospel. The preached word is the lens through which people are able to reframe the loss, despair, and hardships that may be characteristic of their present condition. As interpreter, the pastor is called to draw correlations between human experience and divine narrative in a way that imparts life into the souls of the people. Floyd-Thomas et al. assert that without this essential function of the proclamation, the ritual life of worship is in danger of becoming a dead ritual.¹⁷

The authority of the pastor as interpreter rests in the communal affirmation that this individual is called and set apart by God for the purpose of ministry. The pastor is not only the theologian in residence, but the custodian of sacred traditions and cultural wisdom, both of which the pastor teaches the community of believers to draw upon in ways that are conducive to restoring and sustaining life. The tools provided by the interpretation of the African American everyday experience through the lens of scripture offer a means by which vision and hope are cultivated.¹⁸ The people collectively trust that the pastor has spent time in prayer and conversation with God, and has received an impartation of divine revelation that allows her to "make meaning from the mystery and

¹⁶ Anderson & Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous rituals* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 38.

¹⁷ Floyd Thomas, et al., *Black Church Studies*, 196.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

transcendence into the tangible and needy reality.”¹⁹ The communal trust in the pastor as interpreter is substantiated and rewarded with an ever-evolving sense that hope, vision, life, and fortitude are developing in the life of the worshiping community. This is authenticated as the people are able to become intentionally aware of God’s work in their lives and develop a language to help them do so.²⁰

Chief among the expectations of the pastor is that his role as interpreter is carried out through the vehicle of powerful and experiential preaching. In the African American church context, preaching is central to the worship experience. Many African American congregations will forgive poor leadership and administration if the pastor has a great preaching gift, but the reverse is not necessarily true. Pastors are expected to be skilled orators, imaginative storytellers, and simultaneously erudite and relatable in their delivery. The preaching moment is anticipated throughout the worship service and an atmosphere conducive to preaching is set through song and participatory celebration. People come to the preaching moment with an expectation of receiving something from God, and the prophetic nature of black preaching suggests that what is imparted will be taken to heart by its hearers.²¹ The preaching moment is a communal happening with the capability to shape community, yet it has decidedly intimate and personal implications.²² Frank A. Thomas suggests that as the preacher delivers the sermon with the force of her

¹⁹ Ibid., 158.

²⁰ Edward Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care*, 35.

²¹ Barna & Jackson, *High Impact African American*, 54.

²² Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007) 32.

own insights and experience, “the listeners supply the details of their own lives that allow for self-recognition and self-identification.”²³

The Service of Women in the Black Church

Pertinent to this discussion of African American religious life is the legacy of dedicated service that women have rendered to their households of faith. For generations, African American women have actively served and supported the Black Church in ways that have been critical to its survival. Acting in roles that attend to every aspect of church life from congregational care to preaching and teaching, women have provided service and leadership which has been essential to the efficacy of the Black church as an institution. A number of black churches that have come into existence and been able to survive through generations are indebted to the women who occupy its pews. Without their generous contributions and tireless efforts, these worshiping communities would cease to exist.²⁴ Operating in numerous positions as theologians, musicians, educators, and organizers, black women have played a significant part in the development, organization, and growth of African American worship.²⁵ Lincoln and Mamiya offer an extensive, though not exhaustive, list of the plethora of roles women fulfill in black churches: “evangelists, missionaries, stewardesses, deaconesses, lay readers, writers on religious subjects, Sunday School teachers, musicians, choir members and directors,

²³ Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praising God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1997) 47.

²⁴ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 308.

²⁵ Floyd Thomas, et. al., *Black Church*, 107.

ushers, nurses, custodians, caterers and hostesses for church dinners, secretaries and clerks, counselors, recreation leaders, and directors of Vacation bible schools.”²⁶

Historically and culturally, “mothers of the church” in particular have been considered influential in the life and administration of the churches they serve. As church mothers, these women have been able to nurture both the congregation and the community by engaging in many of the aforementioned tasks.²⁷ The designation of “church mother” is one of honor and endearment that is given to the oldest and most respected members of a worshiping body. This is a cultural tradition for which no corresponding practice can be found in white churches. In some black churches referring to someone as “Mother” is an act of endearment or sign of respect, particularly if she has been both encourager and supporter of the adult members as well as a nurturer of the children. In other African American worshiping bodies, the designation of ‘mother’ carries far more weight, as it signifies a level of influence on decision-making and ministry direction. Some pastors dutifully consult with the mother of the church before making important decisions because they are well aware of her influence among key church members in supporting or suppressing ministry initiatives.²⁸ Frequently underrated and undervalued in their level of importance as it relates to sustaining church life,²⁹ mothers of the church can sometimes be regarded as a detriment rather than as an asset to the forward movement of a ministry.

The extent of what women have the capacity to contribute to church life is not limited to honorific titles and what has been traditionally perceived as female-appropriate

²⁶ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 275.

²⁷ Floyd Thomas, et. al., 107.

²⁸ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 275.

²⁹ Floyd Thomas, et. al., 107.

roles. Yet because of the limits imposed by formal and informal proscriptions, many women in the Black Church have opted to take their gifts beyond the boundaries of their faith communities in order to have a significant impact on society. Secular and sacred organizations alike have benefitted from and relied upon the leadership of church women who were denied access to the pulpit.³⁰ Lincoln and Mamiya highlight a number of women throughout history who channeled their passions for ministry into arenas that were either more acceptable or more accessible. Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth among others provide historical precedents as women of faith who contributed their gifts to the abolitionist movement, which became a vehicle for believers in Christ to actively walk out their faith. In 1832 Maria W. Stewart became the first woman of any color to deliver public political speeches, and Mary McCleod Bethune and Nannie Helen Burroughs each carried out their ministries in the areas of education and politics. It is likely that these and many other unnamed women, who remained devoted to their churches, would have become ordained ministers were that option obtainable.³¹

Black Preaching Women

Until recent times the pastorate was an unattainable goal for women, and in many denominations and worshiping communities female pastors are still a rarity. As a result women in the Black Church had to circumvent the barriers to fulfill the calling on their lives to proclaim the gospel. Operating with titles such as exhorters and evangelists allowed women opportunities to preach in situations that were socially acceptable. It was only due to relentless protest that these opportunities to preach became available.

³⁰ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *Plenty Good Room: Adaptation in a Changing Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books) 113.

³¹ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 285.

Considered to be a function midway between giving testimony and preaching, exhortation involved leading prayer meetings and testifying about personal experiences. The role of the exhorter was to admonish and to call sinners to repentance. Not only did exhorters speak and pray before assembled groups, but they were licensed religious public speakers who at times filled in for itinerant preachers.³²

According to Betty Collier-Thomas, most African American mainline denominations began to formally and informally support women operating as evangelists by the 1920's, giving preaching women an opportunity to bring their proclamation to a variety of settings. Their efforts were welcomed by male clergy who recognized their ability to raise funds and increase church membership. Preaching women also benefitted from their work as evangelists because it allowed them to gain greater public prominence. Not unlike today, preaching at Women's Day events, camp meetings, and revivals gave preaching women exposure and allowed them to attract large audiences. Evangelists were not assigned specifically designated churches like itinerant ministers, although some denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church³³ assigned their evangelists to specific Annual Conferences or an Episcopal district.³⁴ Ultimately their primary assignment was to preach and they did so wherever there was opportunity.

The Fight for Ordination

The first black denomination to officially grant women full ordination was the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church. This move had significant

³² Betty Collier-Thomas *Daughters of Thunder: Black Woman Preachers and Their Sermons 1850-1979* (Ventura: CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997) 20.

³³ The African Methodist Episcopal Church as well as a few other denominations are organized into Episcopal districts which are in turn divided up into Annual Conferences.

³⁴ Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 20.

implications for the other black denominations, if not immediate impact on their polity. In 1891 Bishop James Walker Hood advocated for the election of women as delegates to the general conference, declaring that all rights equal to men would be guaranteed to women by at least one Methodist Episcopal Church. Three years later, Bishop Hood's declaration came to fruition when he ordained Julia Foote as a deacon at the Seventy Third Session of the New York Annual Conference. Progress for women continued in 1895 when Mary J. Small, the wife of a bishop, was also ordained a deacon. In 1898 she went on to become the first woman to be ordained an elder, a pivotal event that was followed two years later by Julia Foote's elder's orders.³⁵

The full ordination of Small in particular, which gave her the same rights and privileges as the men, created controversy across the nation. Betty Collier-Thomas's survey of preaching black women helps us to grasp the full significance of this pivotal moment in the Black Church. According to Collier-Thomas, Foote was in her seventies at her time of ordination, therefore her orders were considered to be an honorific action in recognition of her fifty years of preaching and service. While Foote was well-regarded for her preaching and intellect, there was no concern that she would receive a pastoral appointment. Foote's ordination was celebrated as many took pride in the AMEZ Church being the first denomination to grant a number of rights to women including full ordination. Small's ordination as elder however posed a very real threat to the established power structure, not just in the AMEZ Church, but across denominations and color lines.³⁶

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Bitter debates ensued in the AME Zion Church and a number of other denominations as a result. Prior to Small's ordination, it was believed that while a few women would receive diaconate orders, they would not be appointed to churches and would never be eligible for elder's orders or the episcopacy. Those who did receive pastoral appointments were sent to missions or churches with only a few people. From the perspective of male clergy, ordained women were still only women with the same roles as all other women. AME Zion women held a much different view of the changes happening in their denomination. They saw the ordination of women as a liberating force releasing them from the boundaries of their traditionally and historically prescribed roles. The women of the AME Zion Church had good reason to be encouraged because in the span of two decades they received equal voting rights and the word 'male' was removed from the discipline. These actions along with the ordination of women lifted every legal boundary in the polity that blocked women from advanced levels of service.³⁷

Small's ordination as elder upended the power structures and societal order males had come to expect by giving women potential access to the highest levels of authority in the church. AME Zion ministers receive two orders- diaconate and elders.³⁸ Deacons are authorized to preach, distribute communion, baptize, and officiate weddings, but do not have the same authority as elders. Elders have all of the rights and privileges of a deacon, but are also authorized to consecrate communion. Even more critical to the polity of the church, elders are given priority over deacons for pastoral appointments and are eligible to pursue higher offices in the church including that of presiding elder (which is a level

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ This hierarchal structure for ordained ministers is true for a number of Methodist denominations.

above the pastorate) and the episcopacy. Small's elevation to elder rocked the foundation of patriarchy and sexism on which the men of the church had secured their leadership.

Although this development was monumental in the life of the church and its impact was not limited to one denomination, it did not have the immediate effect of eradicating all of the existing barriers to ordination for women. According to Collier-Thomas, Small's ordination did however cause enough tension between denominations and the genders to elicit a reevaluation of legislation that restricted the service of women. The struggle for women's rights across various faith traditions did not occur in isolation from one another, and undoubtedly each was influenced and empowered by what was being shared in the larger public discourse.³⁹ Yet it would take another half a century before other black denominations would open the door of ordination to women, the African Methodist Episcopal Church included.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church

Prior to the ordination of women or the role of evangelist being legitimized in polity, Jerena Lee emerged as the first preaching woman in the AME Church. At the age of twenty-four, Lee acknowledged her call to ministry after a series of visions and other experiences. In 1809 she first petitioned Richard Allen who at the time was pastoring Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, now known as the historic Mother Bethel and the birthplace of African Methodism. Although Allen was willing to acknowledge the gifts of women to lead prayer meetings, he would not support women preaching and denied her request for a license.⁴⁰ Joseph Lee, Jarena Lee's husband and the pastor of a Methodist

³⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁰ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 279.

society outside of Philadelphia, died in 1811 and Lee began preaching shortly thereafter. She demonstrated great courage in the face opposition from men who opposed her ministry, which frequently separated her from her children.⁴¹

Not long after the death of her husband, Lee once again petitioned Allen who by that time was a newly elected bishop. While he did not ordain her, he demonstrated support for her ministry by giving her speaking engagements at churches under his Episcopal leadership and allowing her to attend meetings with ordained ministers.⁴² Bishop Allen became convinced of her call after hearing her preach in the place of a male minister who had “lost the spirit” in the midst of a preaching moment. Thereafter he became a friend and strong supporter of her ministry. Lee went on to travel over 2,300 miles and deliver 178 sermons during her forties.⁴³ Although today she is acknowledged and celebrated across African Methodism as the first woman to preach in the AME Church, she was never extended the opportunity to receive ordination.

AME women and male supporters made efforts at varying times to secure ordination rights for women called to preach, to no avail. Their attempts did however serve as the catalyst for new positions created specifically for women in an attempt to appease those seeking to fulfill the call to preach. In 1868 the General Conference created the position of stewardess whose primary responsibility was to provide care to other women and assist male stewards, class leaders, and pastors. This was the first official position for women sanctioned by AME Church.⁴⁴ Eight years later, the 1884 General

⁴¹ Vashti McKenzie, *Not Without a Struggle: Leadership Development for African American Women in Ministry*. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2011) 32.

⁴² Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 280.

⁴³ McKenzie, *Not Without a Struggle*, 32.

⁴⁴ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 286.

Conference approved the licensing of preaching women, but also inserted legislation specifically prohibiting women from receiving pastoral appointments. This safeguarded against women preachers posing a threat to male clergy or competing for the same jobs in ministry.

The security benefitting male clergy was once again threatened in an unprecedented and unauthorized move to acknowledge women as clergy. In 1885 the AME Church came close to legitimating the work of preaching women when Sarah Hughes was ordained a deaconess at the North Carolina Annual Conference three years after her pastoral appointment to a church in Fayetteville. Her promotion as well as strides being made by other women in the connection prompted more legislation restricting the promotion of AME women in ministry. As a result Sarah Hughes's ordination was reversed by the North Carolina Conference in 1887.⁴⁵

In 1900 amid growing pressures from women, no doubt fueled by the ordination of women in the AME Zion Church, the position of deaconess was officially legislated in the AME Church. This position was established without ordination despite the fact that male deacons were ordained, a move that replicated patterns found in white Methodist bodies.⁴⁶ With the support of the Women's Missionary Society (WMS), numerous pieces of legislation advocating for the rights of preaching women were presented to and voted down by the General Conference over many years. The WMS remained persistent in their efforts, finally seeing results in 1948 when the General Conference of the AME Church

⁴⁵ Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 27.

⁴⁶ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 286.

voted in favor of ordaining women deacons in their local churches.⁴⁷ It would not be until 1958 that women would receive full ordination with all of its rights and privileges.⁴⁸

Over five decades later, ordained women in the AME Church are operating in roles unimaginable to their predecessors. Beginning in the 1960's, women began running for connectional offices that had been exclusively held by men including the episcopacy. Although their campaigns ultimately proved to be unsuccessful, these women made history by running and gave expression to the changing times. In 1984, Dr. Jamye Coleman Williams, a retired professor of communications, became the editor of the AME Church Review which made her the first woman elected to general office in the AME Church.⁴⁹ The election of women to other key positions followed and by the close of the nineteenth century, the AME Church was considered the most advanced and progressive in terms of the rights of women and women's leadership, surpassing the AME Zion Church.

In the year 2000, the AME Church experienced a historic and monumental shift when Vashti Murphy McKenzie became the first woman elected to the episcopacy in the over two hundred year history of the church. In the shadow of this historic election, Leah Gaskin Fitchue was selected to lead the AME Church's historic Payne Theological Seminary. This not only made Fitchue the first woman to serve this institution as president, but it made her the first African American woman president of a seminary accredited by the highly regarded Association of Theological Schools. Two more women, Carolyn Tyler-Guidry and Sarah Davis, were elected to Episcopal service in 2004, but

⁴⁷ Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 27.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁹ National Visionary Leadership Project <http://www.visionaryproject.org/williamsmdonald/> (accessed 2-10-16).

unfortunately this did not widen women's access to the highest office in African Methodism. Although many have run, no women have been elected at either the two quadrennials that have taken place since 2004. Bishop Davis passed away in 2013 at the age of 65 and Bishop Guidry has since retired. As the connection prepares for elections at the 2016 General Conference, it has widely been rumored that many are waiting out Bishop McKenzie's retirement and have declared "no more women on the bench." It appears that Bishop McKenzie's historic election may have only pierced the stained glass ceiling rather than shattered it.

Contemporary Black Preaching Women and Ministerial Identity

Despite the advances that have been made in recent history, black women in ministry still struggle against sexism in the Black Church. Women make up the majority of the membership in most African American congregations, yet leadership is comprised mostly of male pastors. Even in denominations where women have been officially recognized and accepted as pastors, significant barriers to their upward mobility are still prevalent.⁵⁰ Even with its reputation as a progressive denomination that supports the advancement of women in ministry, the AME Church is no exception. In February 2016 as several of the female candidates addressed women in ministry at the 2nd Episcopal District Founders Day celebration, one candidate confirmed the rumors when she said, "There is a resounding and well-organized voice rising up within the church declaring that we will not elect anymore women."

⁵⁰ Lincoln & Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 307.

Systemic barriers not only block women from the episcopacy and connectional office, but the limitations are also being felt at the level of the pastorate. In the sixteen years since Lincoln and Mamiya's study which included a portion of the 2nd Episcopal District,⁵¹ no woman has been appointed to any of the four largest churches included in the study despite changes in leadership. According to AME "herstory" Sandra Smith Blair, most women pastors in the connection are assigned to small or medium churches in spite of demonstrating gifts for church building and growth. She goes on to say that appointing women to churches with smaller budgets excludes their involvement in certain events, as well as their membership on connectional finance committees, the General Board, and major commissions. These women are also less likely than other pastors to be elected as a General Conference delegate which severely restricts the voting power of women and indirectly impacts their representation in the highest offices.⁵² As more and more women continue to answer the call to ministry, they continue to face the challenge of growing and developing in ministry despite complicated and systemic norms that restrict their opportunities and advancement.

This study seeks to examine how African American women in the Black Church context, specifically the AME Church, construct and further develop ministerial identity in light of these barriers. This examination is not intended to be an apologetic for women in ministry or a focused discussion of the gender biases women in ordained ministry encounter. Instead this study is intended to investigate how African American women clergy create a ministerial identity, define themselves as ordained clergy, and develop

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Sandra Smith Blair Women in Ministry http://www.sedwim.org/Documents/Profiles_of_pioneering_AME_WIM_revised_5_08.pdf (accessed 2-10-16).

professional confidence. Through a qualitative analysis of data in conversation with available literature, this research endeavors to examine the experiences that shape how African American women come to see themselves as ministers in light of the micro-aggressions and micro-inequities they may experience in their local and denominational ministry setting.

The questions guiding this research are:

- How do African American women in ordained ministry create, develop, and sustain ministerial identity?
- How do they define themselves as ordained clergy? What language do they use?
- What experiences (positive and negative) have helped to shape their ministerial identity and how have these experiences informed how they see themselves?
- What are the organizational and systemic implications of the context within which their ministries are situated and how have they contributed to the shaping of ministerial identity?

The chief objective of this research is to give voice to some of the experiences of African American women in ordained ministry and shed light on how these experiences shape how they see themselves as ministers and leaders in the church. Voice can be regarded as the ability to assign meaning to phenomena and is a significant means by which to value and include women's experiences and knowledge in cultural life.⁵³ Secondly, by giving voice to these experiences, the aim of this research is to inform

⁵³ Julia T. Wood, *Critical Feminist Theories in Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2015) 203.

ministerial training and encourage those responsible for developing ministers to reevaluate their processes. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, this research aims to equip all women in ministry with tools of analysis and a lens through which to reframe their experiences for the purpose of constructing ministerial identity in healthy ways.

This work has significance and implications beyond the Black Church context, potentially proving instructive beyond the demographic under investigation. While this work seeks to lift up truths and experiences that are specific to African American women and the Black Church experience, the expectation is that these truths can be universally appreciated and applied. In the same way research about marginalized groups (ideally) informs diversity initiatives and fosters more inclusivity, this research has the potential to be informative and instructive for worshiping communities in general. Ultimately, this research endeavors to add to the prevailing literature on ministerial identity, to contribute to the growing body of literature addressing the ministerial identity of women, and to suggest as fertile ground for future research ministerial identity as it relates specifically to African American women.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to investigate how African American women in the Black Church context, specifically the AME Church, construct and further develop ministerial identity. In order to execute this research endeavor, a thorough examination of literature pertaining to ministerial identity and identity as a construct was necessary. This chapter begins by exploring the origins of identity and its development over time. The discussion then shifts focus to specifically address ministerial identity by examining literature on biblical models, ministerial identity that is co-constructed, and the role of theological education, as well as additional approaches to ministerial identity. Finally this chapter concludes with a discussion of the communication theory of identity (CTI) which served as the theoretical foundation of this study.

Many consider questions such as “who am I” and “how am I perceived by others” to be the substance of adolescent insecurities, yet issues of identity concern us our entire lives. Human beings have been preoccupied with questions about identity throughout recorded history.¹ Our modern understanding of identity has its origins in the disciplines of psychology and sociology, specifically the study of “self.” Scholars attempted early on to articulate the constructs of self-concept (how one thinks about oneself) and self-esteem (how one feels about oneself). However, the linear view of the self as singular perpetuated the perspective that human beings have one core or genuine self.² This

¹ Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and modern insights about individuality, life, and death.* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press) 2006.

² Michael Hecht, “Communication Theory of Identity: Multilayered Understandings of Performed Identities,” in *Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. Dawn O. Braithwaite et al. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 175.

perspective did not allow space to consider the different expressions of self based on setting, circumstances, and interpersonal interactions.

According Michael Hecht, sociologists addressed this myopic view of self with the popularization of symbolic interactionism. This theoretical framework characterized the self as a product of interpersonal interactions and the perception of others. The self as a construct was further augmented with a focus on the influence of significant others on one's development of self as well as the role of a communal definition of self. Despite this expansion in theoretical approach, the self was still a unitary construct with social roles only entering the conversation to address its varying manifestations. Symbolic interactionism did not fully address questions concerning the merging of individual and social aspects, and ultimately relied upon a very individualistic interpretation. As scholars from other disciplines began to wrestle with the tension between the individuality and multiplicity that the self presents, the term identity emerged and came into common usage. An identity approach implies that human beings have multiple identities rather than one core identity. This approach takes into consideration the various roles people play, how such roles shape and define identity, and provides a more complex and accurate image of self.³

Questions of identity are no less pervasive for those serving the church in a ministerial capacity, a role that is both visible and heavily critiqued. The weightiness of the assignment, the articulated and unspoken expectations of the congregation, and in many cases the prominence that accompanies being a spiritual leader can put one's understanding of who they really are in tension with who others perceive them to be. A

³ Ibid.

number of studies have taken up the task of exploring ministerial identity from a variety of frameworks. Not unlike identity studies in other disciplines, the exploration of ministerial identity has undergone a number of shifts in focus as pastors and scholars alike approach ministerial identity from various perspectives.

Biblical Models of Ministerial Identity

For several works, the point of departure in a discussion of ministerial identity utilizes biblical models as a framework. John E. Johnson's work lifts up the strains on ministerial identity as the contemporary crisis of pastoral ministry which he attributes to several main causes. First he asserts that when it comes to the training of pastors, more emphasis has been placed on the practice of ministry instead of the vocation's theological foundation. Leadership capabilities, facility in preaching, gifts of administration, and related attributes have been the primary emphasis for pastoral ministry. Sufficient time has not been given to developing a theology of ministry. Doing so would give pastors the opportunity to explore God's definition of ministry and to wrestle with their understanding of what ministers are supposed to be.⁴

Secondly Johnson argues that expectations of the present culture also play a significant role in creating confusion around ministerial identity. In previous generations, preaching and functioning as the resident theologian were the pastor's primary responsibilities. Current expectations around how pastors lead and care for the people they shepherd are very different than they once were just one generation ago. Today the pastor is expected to address mental and emotional issues with the skill of a therapist,

⁴ John E. Johnson, "The Old Testament Offices as a Paradigm for Pastoral Ministry," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152, (1995): 182-183.

lead church businesses with the acumen chief executive officer, and demonstrate a mastery of church growth. Pastors are often called upon to fulfill these modern-day responsibilities to the detriment of older and more foundational ones. Lastly, Johnson points to questions surrounding the relevancy of the pastor as the third cause of the prevailing pastoral identity crisis. He argues that ministry, although respected, appears to be disconnected from what society deems valuable.⁵

Johnson presents the Old Testament models of prophet, priest, king, and sage as a solution to the identity crisis of pastoral ministry. He suggests ministerial identity and function should be evaluated through the framework these roles offer, particularly as they are ultimately fulfilled in Christ.⁶ The pastor as prophet should act as God's mouthpiece and serve as a divine conscience with the passionate assurance that God is speaking through them by the power of the Holy Spirit. The word of God should be carried in the mouth of the pastor like a burden of divine compulsion. The pastor as prophet must also be willing to bear the price of confronting the evil of his or her day and being the conscience of the community, be it small talk or overt personal attacks.⁷

The office of priest requires the pastor to be sensitive to the needs of the congregation and to be willing to accompany the people into the depths of their pain. Pastors must also take up the task of confronting sin, thereby facilitating reconciliation with God and with each other. This requires the pastor to cultivate the heart of an intercessor and at times to expend immense emotional energy. The priestly function also calls pastors to guard the worship experience. She is called to help the people prepare for

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 200.

⁷ Ibid., 192.

an encounter with God as she presides over the worship service. Similarly, pastors are not only called to maintain the holiness of the worship experience, but also the holiness of their lives.⁸

As sage, the pastor is to possess passionate affection for the truth as he searches for wisdom. The pastor's faithful pursuit of discernment and understanding is painstaking and laborious, but driven by a conviction that wisdom is a gift from God. Pastors should be dedicated to the integration of truth and everyday life, making them an observer of people. This requires them to have knowledge of the lived realities experienced by their people in their workplaces, schools, and homes. This is necessary in order to minister to the practicalities of living into spiritual and theological truths. Called upon to comfort individuals facing varying degrees of crisis, the pastor as sage must be attentive to that which comes with all stages of the life cycle.⁹

Lastly, although the pastor is not necessarily called to "rule" over the church, there are several leadership qualities one can extract from the role of king. Pastors are to provide leadership that can be trusted and unite the people toward a common goal. They lovingly move the people forward in decision-making, recognizing that ultimately all authority belongs to God. A pastor's guidance must be bold without being coercive; infused with an empathy and sensitivity to the needs of the congregation. Like the Old Testament kings, a pastor has the responsibility of articulating the vision God is imparting to the people. According to Johnson, part of pastoral identity is charting a course of action toward the fulfillment of the vision and being a good steward of the

⁸ Ibid., 195.

⁹ Ibid., 197.

resources. This entails equipping the people God has uniquely gifted to accomplish the work of service.¹⁰

Similarly Jon L. Berquist employs biblical models but focuses on modes in which ministers come to sense their own identity regardless of their specific roles or function. He presents four models of ministerial identity drawn from biblical examples of those committed to God's service- the trained minister, the involved minister, the flexible minister, and the transforming minister.¹¹ The trained minister is one who receives an extensive amount of training in the specific area of ministry to which she is called. Berquist specifically lifts up the Hebrew bible's image of priest as a primary example, although there are others. Vast legislation governed the functioning of priests and they commanded a wide array of information. They possessed knowledge related to every aspect of daily life and shared this knowledge for the purpose of uplifting of the community as a whole. Likewise, the trained minister is one whose identity rests in his skill, training, and education. In many cases, in order for her to perform her role with confidence many years of experience and several advanced degrees are necessary. The trained minister can benefit the worship community and contribute to the well-being of the people his vast knowledge and skill. Yet this training-based model may leave some without an internalized awareness of pastoral identity and somewhat disconnected from things of importance beyond information and skill.¹²

The involved minister and the flexible minister each place greater emphasis on the relational aspect of ministerial identity rather than the interior. The involved minister is

¹⁰ Ibid., 199.

¹¹ Jon L. Berquist, "Who Do You Say that I Am? Biblical Images and Ministerial Identity," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 41 (2004): 18.

¹² Ibid., 21.

one who personally experiences the selfhood of others. Berquist offers Moses, as well as the prophets, as an image of the involved minister. Moses took up the task of ministry to and the liberation of God's people at great personal risk. He stood before Pharaoh and went before the Israelites as they marched in the wilderness, meeting first whatever dangers awaited. The involved minister is one who also involves himself in ministry in ways that can be direct and sometimes challenging. This mode of ministerial identity moves one to experience the selfhood of others, sitting with them in the midst of their pain. While the involved minister is concretely invested in the well-being of the people she serves, she risks becoming overwhelmed by the frustration of such involvements. High levels of involvement may result in unhealthy behavior when he believes he is personally responsible for all of the people he serves.¹³

The model of the flexible minister is exemplified in the image of Paul, according to Berquist. The Pauline mode of ministerial identity takes on the arduous responsibility of becoming all things to all people. Rather than being random, Paul's multiple approaches to ministry were born of an intentional effort to vary styles in order to meet the needs of each specific circumstance. He determined what style was best for each of the situations he encountered and adhered to that style with intensity and intentionality. Although Paul's flexibility made him adjustable, his goals remained the same despite the transitions in his ministerial style. Whether he utilized Greek philosophy or Jewish debate forms to shape his arguments, his objective of transforming the church never wavered. This model of ministerial identity is not without its shortcomings. This kind of flexibility in a pastor can appear as instability or people-pleasing, making the pastor seem to be

¹³ Ibid., 24.

inconsistent or plagued by integrity issues. This may diminish effectiveness and can result in a fragmented ministerial identity, ultimately leading to burn out.¹⁴

Berquist ultimately lifts up the model of transforming minister as exemplified by Jesus as the ideal mode of developing ministerial identity. His depiction of Jesus as possessing an ever-unfolding ministerial identity is unusual and perhaps somewhat controversial. Berquist asserts that Jesus did not start out with a concrete ministerial identity, but instead his identity took shape over time. He suggests that Jesus fully embraced all of he was and developed self-understanding as a result of other people telling him who he was. Berquist supports this assertion with an alternate reading of the fact that Jesus rarely makes claims about his own identity, despite the gospel narrator's revelatory tone. Through shared living with the disciples and hearing others speak about him, Jesus forms his public identity and becomes known as the Messiah. For Jesus identity is not static, rather it is continually evolving through interactions with believers and detractors alike. Similarly, ministerial identity grows and changes for pastors throughout the course of ministry. Pastors constantly shape and reshape their identity through their interactions with those whom they serve and also in their times of vulnerability. Through close personal interaction, the engaging minister sacrifices the established identity for the construction of a newer expanded one.¹⁵

Closely related to biblical models of pastoral identity, scholars have also called for a return to other traditional resources, which includes models that can be found in the church fathers. Clare McGrath-Merkle presents Gregory the Great and his metaphor of

¹⁴ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵ Ibid., 28.

the physician's heart as a model for pastoral identity. During the time of Gregory, administrative rule of secular affairs had become an arduous aspect of papal responsibilities. Gregory himself was very ambivalent about the imposition of administrative responsibilities and the conflict between pastoral duties and those that come with high level leadership.¹⁶ For Gregory, the pastor was one who in mercy transferred the weaknesses of others onto himself. The pastor should engaged in continual contemplation and have the ability to extend the outward reach of mercy as evidence of success in contemplation. Sensitive to the move of the spirit, Gregory possessed great pastoral discernment. He believed the ability to work miracles and demonstrated humility were the two definitive signs of the Holy Spirit's presence.¹⁷

Central to Gregory's interpretation and understanding of pastoral identity was the heart, terming those in pursuit of spiritual leadership positions "physicians of the heart."¹⁸ The heart has the capability of being shaped by the elation of being elevated by God to service in the pastorate. Likewise, the heart is also susceptible to division if the mind becomes confused and itself divided from giving attention to many things. Gregory presented the image of a pastor at risk of becoming "delinquent at heart" and overcome with life's issues and concerns if he does not care for his heart.¹⁹ His model of pastoral identity places emphasis on a contemplative spirituality of compassion and a focus on community rather than individual development. McGrath-Merkle asserts that an appropriation of Gregory's "physician of the heart" metaphor would simplify pastoral

¹⁶Clare McGrath-Merkle, "Gregory the Great's Metaphor of the Physician's Heart as a Model for Pastoral Ministry," *Journal of Religious Health* 50 (2011): 379.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 381.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 382.

¹⁹ Gregory the Great. *The Book of Pastoral Rule*. in Behr & G. E. Demacopoulos (Vol.Trans.), (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 69.

identity, thereby making the pastorate joyful rather than inundated with unrealistic expectations.²⁰

Co-Constructed Ministerial Identity

The studies highlighted thus far in this discussion speak to formative considerations ministerial identity and have all presented models to which one should aspire. Yet some scholars have elected to pursue a more interpretive approach to ministerial identity rather than the prescriptive tone reflected in the studies focusing on the biblical models. Similar to the transforming minister presented by Berquist, Samuel Park asserts that pastoral identity is co-constructed. According to Park, few works specifically focus on the theme of pastoral identity, and those that do fall into familiar and recurring categories. These studies tend to either presume pastoral identity to be an individual conception, focus on pastoral identity in relation to theological commitments, treat pastoral identity as conceptual rather than a concrete factor in care-giving, or focus on pastoral identity from a formational perspective.²¹

Park is also critical of the narrow definition of pastoral identity put forth in much of the prevailing literature. In particular, he criticizes the widely held view of pastoral identity as an individual's own property resulting from cognitive reasoning, theological reflection, or distinctive and habitual behaviors. His contention is that such a view allows for a perception of pastoral identity as belonging exclusively to the care-giver without taking into account the care-receiver. This conventional way of defining pastoral identity is misleading and perpetuates the belief that pastoral identity should in general be

²⁰ McGrath-Merkle, "Pastor's Heart," 386.

²¹ Samuel Park, "Pastoral Identity Constructed in Care-Giving Relationships," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 66, (2012): 2.

consistent and unvarying. Prevailing definitions leave little room to account for social and cultural contexts, and their influence on pastoral identity.²²

Park's research shows pastoral identity to be socially and relationally constructed through mutual and dynamic interactions between the care-giver and the care-receiver. An identity as a spiritual leader is always foundational to the care-giver's identity, yet that understanding is altered and humbled through the encounter with the experiences of the one in need of care. Listening to the stories and witnessing the suffering of the care-seekers brings about an identity-altering sense of humility for the care-giver. As the relationship between the two progresses, the care-giver hears and responds to the care-seeker's request for help, and the care-seeker either accepts or rejects the care that is provided. Together the participants in this dialogical interaction co-construct pastoral identity- the care-seeker by sharing his or her life and crises and the care-giver by listening and being present. Pastoral identity continues to evolve further as the care-giver engages in meaning-making, bringing interpretation to the seeker's realities through the lens of theological reflection. Pastoral care-givers must also be fully aware of the presence and move of God who is at work among them and their care-seekers, making that truth the cornerstone of their identity.²³

Similarly, Maureen O'Brien asserts that ministerial identity is co-constructed through ongoing discourse with potential sources of meaning-making. Her work with lay ecclesial ministers in the Roman Catholic Church partly focuses on ministerial identity in the midst of ambiguity of function. These lay ministers are involved in a number of

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 9.

different discourses through their intricate and overlapping relationships with colleagues in ministry, larger church associations, church hierarchy that may or may not acknowledge their ministry, and those to whom they minister. Each of these conversations and interactions has the potential to significantly influence ministerial identity in ways that at times may become complex and conflicting. Given the marginal role of lay ecclesial ministers within the church context, O'Brien suggests the creation of an environment that will improve their ability make sense of the complexities they face in these relationships. This environment should include a process by which lay ecclesial ministers can bring their multiple interactions into conversation with an intentional awareness of God's work and presence. Within these knowledge communities, new conversations are able to emerge, bringing about transformation and inclusion in a larger community of knowledgeable peers.²⁴

O'Brien's work on ministerial identity highlights the difficulty the participants found in naming themselves and the work in which they are engaged, as well as the lack of ecclesial support in that endeavor. In the beginning of her study, many of the participants struggled with the self-appropriation of the terms "minister" and "ministry" as it relates to their function and activity. Much ambiguity of self-understanding existed not only for the ministers, but also for those whom they serve. None of the participants received any kind of formal commissioning or official recognition as ministers, further complicating ministerial identity and underscoring their marginality. By the end of this longitudinal study, the participants came to prioritize their identity as ministers over and

²⁴ Maureen O'Brien, "A Study of Ministerial Identity and Theological Reflection among Lay Ecclesial Ministers," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 11 (2007): 216.

above the ambiguities of their ministerial tasks and functionalities through theological reflection and dialoguing with peers.²⁵

Ministerial Identity and Theological Education

Ann L. Burton and Charles A. Weinrich present an approach to pastoral identity that engages theological education, suggesting in their work that the way one sees oneself as a pastor first emerges in the context of family. They advocate for the use of family systems methods as a critical tool for self-reflection and the exploration of pastoral identity as a part of theological education and training. For Burton and Weinrich, examination and reflection on pastoral identity should begin with acknowledging the influence a person's experiences in the original family unit had on the decision to move in the direction of pastoral ministry. Their work encourages individuals to reflect on their various individual relationships with family members as well as the messages they received through the overall family dynamic. Doing so allows for the discovery of the various religious traditions in which one's call to ministry has its basis, and how the family of origin shaped and defined their vision of ministry.²⁶

Burton and Weinrich achieved positive results from the students with whom they have employed family systems methods. Their participants reported feeling the process helped them work through issues that may have otherwise remained dormant only to arise later at critical points in ministry. These methods not only impacted personal reflection but also brought about professional growth as the participants engaged in pastoral

²⁵ Ibid., 224.

²⁶ Ann L. Burton et al., "So Great Cloud of Witnesses: The Use of Family Systems Process in Forming Pastoral Identity and Facilitating Pastoral Functioning," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 4, (1990):335.

ministry. Participants reported increased understanding of their parishioners as a part of a larger system which in turn informed their actions and responses to ministry challenges. They also learned new options for managing the demands that are a part of pastoral ministry and felt encouraged through the process to lay claim to their pastoral authority.²⁷

Similarly, Kathleen A. Cahalan also draws a connection between ministerial identity and experiences that are intentionally designed as a part of theological education. Her work explores how theological education can invite students in the Catholic community to explore their ministerial identity and vocation. Cahalan highlights the decrease in the number of ordained priests entering seminary and the increased number of lay ecclesial ministers who are mostly women as one of the main reasons for placing so much focus on answering the question of “who is the minister.” The Catholic community faces a large number of people called to nontraditional avenues of actively engaging in ministry. As a result, ministers often find themselves having to construct a ministerial and vocational identity in an ever-changing, often ambiguous, and possibly contentious ecclesial atmosphere. Ministerial identity then becomes not just a personal issue, but also an ecclesial one as well.²⁸

Cahalan argues that ministerial identity should first be firmly rooted in the traditions of the church. She devotes significant time and attention to the history of the minister at every level, from the episcopacy to the lay ecclesial minister. She asserts that students cannot fully comprehend contemporary theological developments without first being strongly grounded in tradition. Along those same lines, she also posits that many

²⁷ Ibid., 340.

²⁸ Kathaleen A. Cahalan, “Introducing Ministry and Fostering Integration: Teaching the Bookends of the Masters of Divinity Program,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 11 (2008): 66.

students enter seminary arguing for change, yet are unable to advance compelling arguments from within the tradition. Secondly, Cahalan places importance on the role of the students' capstone projects which challenges them to publically demonstrate their capacity for practical theological thinking before fellow students, area pastors, and faculty. Doing so requires students to speak from a place of vocational authority and take ownership of their role as ministers in the local community. The presentation causes the student's identity to emerge and becomes a seminal moment as the student lays claim to her ecclesial identity, her voice, and her ministerial expertise.²⁹

Additional Approaches to Ministerial Identity

Reinard Nauta engages the psychological dimensions in his work on ministerial identity. He suggests that when asked about their ministerial identity, pastors present an image of themselves based on an idealized understanding of what it means to be an effective pastor. Often this image is incongruent with their lived experiences and the reality demonstrated through their actions as they carry out pastoral responsibilities. Much like the biblical models, the idealized role models that inform ministerial identity are intended to be aspirational and considered to be predictive as it relates to how pastors should act out their leadership role. As a result of the tension between what is real and what is ideal, ministerial identity is plagued by a significant amount of ambiguity. Nauta suggests a performance based assessment of ministerial identity would be a considerably

²⁹ Ibid., 73.

more accurate and realistic. This approach considers the various roles assumed by a pastor- teacher, preacher, counselor- and the conditions requiring the role to be played.³⁰

Nauta goes on to assert that ministerial identity should be conceived of as a particular location within a ‘pastoral space’ that is multifaceted and complex, rather than a choice made between mutually exclusive narrowly defined models. That pastoral space is comprised of the entirety of all possible relationships, interactions, responsibilities, and general performance of pastoral duties. Where a pastor locates herself within that space is a result of the negotiation between a personally preferred style and the demands of the social expectations that accompany clerical activities. Inherent in this understanding of ministerial identity is the ambiguity felt as a result of the compromises made between personal preference and contextual commitment. To compromise necessarily means to forego the option of operating alternative identities that may be personally preferred. Frustration and disappointment are potentially resident in any identity choice because of the lost opportunity to explore or live into the alternative identity. Although a choice is necessary in order to function and to arrive at a formed ministerial identity, the act of choosing inhibits the full expression of a person’s distinctiveness and potential.³¹

David Pooler employs role identity theory to analyze ministerial identity and the dangers involved when pastors create for themselves an idealized identity. Not unlike symbolic interactionism, role identity theory places its focus on the process of meaning-making as it relates to an individual’s role and identity. This theory of self brings the interactions between an individual and his immediate social context into conversation

³⁰ Reinhard Nauta, “Psychological Dynamics of Pastoral Identity,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 9 (1996): 51.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

with identity formation. Role identity theory suggests that one's most prominent identity is informed and some cases determined by the role one assumes. Not unlike Nauta, Pooler also suggests that this identity is often idealized with behavioral expectations that in reality would be nearly impossible to attain. Pastors create for themselves an idealized ministerial identity when they view themselves as set apart, different, and possibly elevated above the people they serve. Members are also complicit in co-constructing this idealized ministerial identity because of the impractical expectations and demands they place on their pastoral leadership.³²

According to Pooler, it becomes easy for pastors to privilege this role over others they may play because of the value placed on them by the congregation and the community. He points specifically to the duality in relationships brought about by the pastorate which creates fluid boundaries and does not allow room for pastors to further develop other identities as a part of her self-concept. Even when a pastor engages in social activities with others who may or may not be members of his congregation, he is often called upon for help dealing with life's circumstances. Because the role of pastor does not fit into a neatly defined workday and one's social network may overlap with one's professional network, boundaries can become blurred and ministry has the potential to overshadow the whole of one's identity. As a result, the capacity and opportunities for a pastor to cultivate and privilege other identities such as spouse, parent, sibling, or friend is significantly impaired.³³

³² David Pooler, "Pastors and Congregations at Risk," *Journal of Pastoral Psychology* 60 (2011), 707.

³³ *Ibid.*

The danger enters to both pastor and the people when the pastor's idealized and flawed ministerial identity inadvertently allows for indiscretions and abuses of power. This can occur when pastors possess the kind of negative attributes they usually ascribe to members of their congregation such as lust, addiction, or mental health issues. These characteristics are inconsistent with their idealized ministerial identity, so they deny the reality of their existence and instead engage in activities that will reinforce and further augment their idealized identity. These activities- for example, more pastoral visits and increased attention to congregational needs- also reinforce the idealized identity in the minds of the people and put further strain on existing weaknesses.³⁴ Because she is viewed as a mediator between God and the people, she internalizes a supernaturally transcendent role which is in conflict with hidden negative attributes and the need to seek help. This ultimately creates an environment that discounts the humanity of the pastor, legitimizes a damaged perception of ministerial identity, and pushes self-care to the background.³⁵

The number of existing studies that squarely focus on ministerial identity, as opposed to pastoral theology or ministerial formation, is quite limited. Similarly, the literature focused on ministerial identity as it relates to the unique experiences and challenges of women in ministry is scant at best. Yet, a number of insights exist in the work of feminist scholars that can inform this examination of ministerial identity from the perspective of women clergy. Miriam Anne Glover-Wetherington specifically addresses ministerial identity and professional confidence of women as a part of her work counseling women entering ministry. She notes that unlike their male counterparts,

³⁴ Ibid., 708.

³⁵ Ibid., 709.

women are less likely than men to have considered the pastorate and predominantly conceive of their ministerial education as a career choice. Many women in general, mid-life women in particular, have a difficult time envisioning themselves in the role of pastor despite entering seminary with a sense of their call to the pastorate. Discouraging messages about appropriate gender roles and a lack of role models can be hindrances to women considering pastoral ministry.³⁶

Glover-Wetherington also highlights the fact that ministerial identity and professional confidence emerge from the intersection of a minister's perceptions of herself and others' perception of them. This is further complicated by the cultural expectations governing gender identity. Ordained ministry is still largely deemed to be a male profession, which may create ambivalent feelings for the pastor herself about performing her ministerial duties. Questions may arise within her about how she will be perceived as a woman if she succeeds in performing her ministerial function well. Women in ministry also often feel patronized and discounted by comments they receive from church members who struggle with understanding the presence of a woman preacher, which they perceive to be an oddity. They are then tasked with the responsibility of shaping appropriate responses to such comments, deciding to either meet the expectation to be warm and friendly or challenge sexist presuppositions within the context of a brief exchange.³⁷

Closely related to cultivating ministerial identity and professional confidence is the problem of claiming power. According to Glover-Wetherington, many women in

³⁶ Miriam Anne Glover-Wetherington, "Pastoral Care with Women Entering Ministry," in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessener (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 76.

³⁷ Ibid.

ministry experience internal difficulties with claiming power because they were socialized to be passive or supportive. Claiming power can be particularly challenging if the minister is not perceived by the congregation as having genuine authority. When church members perceive a woman in ministry as not having legitimate authority to lead, they will become unresponsive to her leadership cues in ways they would not be to a man. Women in ministry would do well to claim their power theologically as an affirmation of God's choice to accompany and empower her actions. Embracing this understanding allows for not only the claim of power, but also the exercise of power in ways that are more direct than many women are generally accustomed to exerting.³⁸

Communication Theory of Identity

This study of ministerial identity among African American women in ministry draws upon the communication discipline and employs the communication theory of identity (CTI) for its analysis. Developed by communication scholar Michael Hecht, this theoretical framework has its roots in the discipline of communication, yet its full articulation is a product of exposure to interdisciplinary considerations.³⁹ CTI views identity as layered, dynamic through interaction among the layers, and enacted by communication. The layers are indicative of the multiple modes through which identity is experienced including cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and spiritual. CTI also places emphasis on the understanding that individuals have multiple identities and at any given time, our identity consists of many if not all of these layers.

³⁸ Ibid., 81.

³⁹ Hecht, *Multilayered Understandings*, 177.

Where CTI significantly differs from other theories of identity is its explicit articulation of the interdependence between communication and identity. The communicative process creates, sustains, and changes identity, just as much as it is a performance or enactment of identity. CTI recognizes how identity shapes the way messages are created, performed, and understood, and how communication operates as identity.⁴⁰ CTI has ten aphoristic propositions or assumptions that further characterize identity:

1. Identities have individual, social, and communal properties.
2. Identities are both enduring and changing.
3. Identities are affective, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual.
4. Identities have both content and relationship levels of interpretation.
5. Identities involve both subjective and ascribed meaning.
6. Identities are codes that are expressed in conversations and define membership in communities.
7. Identities have semantic properties that are expressed in core symbols, meanings, and labels.
8. Identities prescribe modes of appropriate and effective communication.
9. Identities are a source of expectations and motivations.
10. Identities are emergent.⁴¹

The layered approach is indicative of the belief that the creation and maintenance of an individual's identity is a continual process of inter- and intrapersonal communication rather than a result of such communication. CTI suggests that social interaction, relationships, and a sense of self are internalized and become identities by the process of communication. Identity is then performed or enacted as communication. This approach describes communication and identity as functioning in a reciprocal

⁴⁰ Michael Hogg et al, "Communication Theory of Identity," in *Encyclopedia of Identity*, ed. Michael Hogg et al. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 116.

⁴¹ Michael Hecht et al., "Communication Theory of Identity as a Framework for Health Message Design" in *Health Communication Message Design*, ed. Hyunyi Cho. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2012), 140.

relationship. CTI also emphasizes a collective aspect of identity, as it possesses a “shared” element because it is socially constructed. Members of groups hold a general image of “selfhood” in the same ways they share a culture, language, convictions, and customs. The group identity is reflected in cultural artifacts and myths, and it eclipses the identity of any individual group member.

Four layers or frames comprise identity according to CTI- the personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers.⁴² Although our culture tends to conceptualize identity as a cognitive element within the individual, CTI suggests an expanded view of identity as existing within each of these four layers or frames.⁴³ The layers are not mutually exclusive, but instead are interdependent, continually impacting and interacting with each other. Hecht uses the term “interpenetration” to represent this continual interconnectedness between the layers. Although the layers should not be viewed as existing separately in any way, they are often examined individually for analytical convenience.⁴⁴

The personal identity layer refers to how an individual defines him- or herself, and it is most closely related Western culture’s understanding of self which privileges the individual.⁴⁵ In certain respects this layer is comparable to self-concept, how one sees oneself, feelings about oneself, and/or one’s sense of being from a spiritual perspective.⁴⁶ The personal identity layer offers some insight into how people characterize themselves both generally and situationally. The enacted layer refers to how individuals perform or

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Hogg et al., *Communication Theory of Identity*, 116.

⁴⁴ Hecht, *Framework for Health Message Design*, 140.

⁴⁵ Hecht, *Multilayered Understandings*, 178.

⁴⁶ Hecht, *Framework for Health Message Design*, 140.

enact identity and how behavior expresses who they are. Communication functions in a way that expresses identity, therefore communication through performance must be taken into consideration in order to fully understand identity. All messages are not necessarily about identity, but identity is certainly an aspect of all messages.⁴⁷

The relational identity layer refers to identities that are defined based on particular relationships (friend, spouse, coworker), in relation the identities of others (leader/follower), and those identities attributed to an individual by others with whom he or she interacts.⁴⁸ This layer speaks to the understanding of identity as a product that is mutually negotiated and constructed through communication within a relational context.⁴⁹ Lastly, the communal layer refers to the identity of the group or collective in which an individual holds membership. Comparable to the notion of collective memory, the communal layer is indicative of the common stories, characteristics, and history upon which group identities are based.⁵⁰

The four layers or frames are at times incongruent with each other and can demonstrate inconsistencies. Despite the contradictions and the tensions between them, the four layers still coexist as interpenetrating aspects of identity. Although not all interpenetrations are indicative of discrepancies or contradictions, their presence exemplifies the dynamic and fluid nature of identity. What Hecht terms as 'identity gaps' was created as a construct to address and examine the discrepancies between the layers. This is not to discount the significance of the ways in which the four layers may enhance

⁴⁷ Hogg, *Communication Theory of Identity*, 116.

⁴⁸ Hecht, *Multilayered Understandings*, 178.

⁴⁹ Hogg, *Communication Theory of Identity*, 117.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

each other, which is an aspect also worthy of exploration.⁵¹ The dynamic and expansive approach to identity offered by CTI makes this theoretical framework an effective tool for this study's examination of ministerial identity.

The purpose of this chapter was to present a comprehensive and critical review of prevailing literature pertaining to ministerial identity. The development of identity as a construct over time was reviewed as well as the shift from the widely held view of identity as individualistic and singular to a more contemporary understanding of identity as co-constructed and multifaceted. Similar shifts in the understanding of ministerial identity were explored, from prescriptive models from biblical and traditional resources to ministerial identity that is co-constructed through a complex web of interactions. Reflective methods and activities available through theological education and multidisciplinary approaches were also considered as a part of this review of literature, which concluded with a detailed discussion of CTI as the theoretical framework for this study. The chapter that follows presents in detail the methodology employed for purpose of examining ministerial identity utilizing CTI.

⁵¹ Eura Jung et al., "Elaborating the Theory of Identity," *Communication Quarterly* 52, (2004): Summer 2004; 267-268.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine how African American women clergy serving in a black church context construct and further develop ministerial identity. It is the conviction of the researcher that a fuller understanding of ministerial identity from the perspective of African American women in ministry would give voice to their experiences, inform ministerial training, and equip them with tools of analysis for the purpose of cultivating ministerial identity in healthy ways. The research questions guiding this study are: (a) How do African American women in ordained ministry create, develop, and sustain ministerial identity? (b) How do they define themselves as ordained clergy? What language do they use? (c) What experiences (positive and negative) have helped to shape their ministerial identity and how have these experiences informed how they see themselves? (d) What are the organizational and systemic implications of the context within which their ministries are situated and how have they contributed to the shaping of ministerial identity?

This chapter discusses the research methodology employed and provides detailed information pertaining to the following aspects of the study: (a) overview of research design, (b) description of the research sample, (c) methods of data collection, (d) analysis of data, (e) issues of trustworthiness, and (f) limitations of the study.

Overview of the Research Design

The researcher has chosen to employ a qualitative research design for this examination of African American women clergy and ministerial identity. Qualitative

research is predominantly concerned with answering questions about why phenomena have occurred and examining how individuals experience their context. This approach is particularly useful for ascertaining the mind-set, perceptions, reflections, and interpretation of research participants in a way that is generally limited in quantitative research. Ultimately qualitative inquiry is concerned with the human experience rather than the more predictive aspects of research.¹ This qualitative study is essentially grounded in a constructivist perspective in that this study does not assume any singular reality, and it utilizes interpretive methods to make the connection between concrete observations and abstract meanings.² Understanding and extracting meaning from the experiences of African American women in ministry are the intentions of this research endeavor. The concept of understanding is essential to the interpretive framework, and many scholars have highlighted the inextricable link between understanding and interpretation. Meaning is both revealed and experienced in interpretive work, as meaning-making is the chief objective in the understanding of social phenomena.³

A case study design was most suitable for this research because it allows for both examination of an existing phenomenon within its actual context and a rich and meaningful portrayal of that phenomenon.⁴ The particular need to utilize a case study design for this study emerges from the desire to understand a social phenomenon that is complex in nature. Case study research allows the researcher to obtain a comprehensive

¹ Givens, Lisa. "Introduction," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 3.

² Joachim K. Blatter, "Case Study," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 70.

³ Himika Bhattacharya, "Interpretive Research," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 465.

⁴ Jenifer Tetnowski, "Qualitative Case Study Research Design, Perspectives on Fluency and Fluency Disorders," 25, 2015, p39.

and thorough understanding of the situation under investigation as well as underlying meaning for those who are involved. To some extent this study could be considered a multiple case study because while all of the ministers who participated serve under the direction of the same regional leadership and are governed by the guidelines, they are not serving in the same immediate context. Multiple case research involves two or more observations of the same phenomenon yielding greater richness in the data and more robust findings.⁵ Both the regional and local contexts will be considered as units of analysis for the purposes of this investigation.

The following list delineates the steps taken in carrying out this research endeavor. A brief note regarding the review of literature and the institutional review board immediately follows this list, and a more detailed description of each step in the process of executing this study is presented in subsequent sections.

- After the researcher developed an interest in the phenomenon under investigation and research questions were created, a thorough literature review, discussed in the previous chapter, was conducted to survey the contributions of other researchers, pastors, and practitioners to the area of ministerial identity.
- Following the approval of the research proposal, the researcher sought approval from the Institutional Review Board. This involved outlining and adjusting the research protocol to ensure its adherence to the appropriate guidelines and procedures for the protection of human subjects which included confidentiality and informed consent.

⁵ Felipe M. Santos et al., "Multiple Case Study," *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 70.

- Potential research participants who met the criteria for inclusion were solicited at two different denominational conferences attended by the researcher. These initial exchanges were followed up by emails detailing the aims of the research, the experience they could anticipate as a research participant, and the level of confidentiality that could be expected. At that time a participant consent form was also sent.
- Semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 women who were either already ordained or in the ordination process and working toward ordination.
- Interview data were analyzed utilizing the communication theory of identity (CTI) as the main theoretical framework. The data were first separated according to the four frames of CTI (personal, relational, enacted, and communal), grouped according to emerging themes, compared across the four frames, and then brought into conversation with literature from a number of theological disciplines including feminist, womanist, and practical theologies.
- Member checks were conducted throughout the data collection process and once the data were analyzed to ensure accurate representation of the participants' perspectives.

Literature Review

A continual review of prevailing literature on ministerial identity was conducted to inform this study. The researcher made the decision early in the literature review to include literature that utilized the term 'ministerial identity' as well as that which utilized the term 'pastoral identity.' The rationale behind this decision was that in the African

Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, ministers are expected to advance through every level of ministerial training- from licentiate to elder- with the ultimate objective of receiving elders orders and becoming eligible to pastor. The prevailing assumption when individuals begin the ministerial process is that they have a desire to receive a pastoral appointment. Ministers who are fully ordained and even those in the ordination process are trained to think and operate pastorally. They are viewed as extensions of the senior pastor's leadership, assuming responsibility for congregational care and taking initiative to make administrative decisions when necessary.

The objective of the literature review was to ascertain the various ways that scholars and practitioners approached, examined, and described ministerial identity. Some of the available literature related to ministerial identity was couched under pastoral theology or ministerial formation, which the researcher made a determination to exclude since it did not squarely focus on the research topic. The literature review also surveyed the various approaches to identity across a variety of disciplines including psychology, sociology, and communication. Lastly the literature review served the purpose of identifying the communication theoretical framework from the communication that serves as the basis of this study, a decision that was based on the researcher's own background and experience in this particular discipline.

Institutional Review Board Approval

After receiving approval for the proposed research, the researcher sought approval from the institutional review board (IRB) whose responsibility it is to ensure researchers adhere to the standards and guidelines in place for the study of human subjects.

Institutional review boards create research standards specific to their institution based on federal guidelines. They also protect participants from physical and emotional injury by requiring researchers to obtain informed consent.⁶ The researcher submitted the research protocol to the IRB which included detailed information about the research design, participant selection, confidentiality statement, email communication, and consent form. The wording in the research protocol was adjusted slightly according to the requests made by the IRB to ensure the protection of the participants.

Description of Research Participants

The entire AME Church is organized into Episcopal districts and then into conferences within each of those districts. All of the research participants serve churches within either the Baltimore Conference or the Washington Conference, both of which are a part of Second Episcopal District of the AME Church. These two conferences were chosen because they were the same conferences selected for examination in Lincoln and Mamiya's seminal work, *The Black Church Experience*,⁷ and because the researcher readily had access to the ministers in these conferences. The church's organizational culture can be highly political and at times punitive toward individuals who operate or speak of the church in ways that are contrary to established but unspoken norms. This presented a few challenges and made it all the more necessary for the researcher to ensure the confidentiality of the participants' responses.

All thirteen of the participants in this study are women who are either ordained or pursuing ordination in the AME Church. The women range in age from twenty-seven to

⁶ Carol B. Warren, "Qualitative Interviewing," in *The Handbook of Interview Research* ed. Jaber F. Gubrium et al. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2001, 85.

⁷ Lincoln & Mamiya, *The Black Church*.

sixty-four years of age. Three of the thirteen participants are senior pastors. Of the remaining participants who are all serving as associate ministers, four are itinerant elders, two are itinerant deacons, three are in the ordination process on the itinerant track, and one is in the ordination process on the local track.⁸ All four of those in the ordination process are within a year of receiving their deaconate orders. Seven of the thirteen are currently serving in the Washington Conference and the other six are serving in the Baltimore Conference. All of the women are bi-vocational except two of the senior pastors, one of whom recently retired from a secular position before being appointed to the pastorate. Only the three senior pastors hold paid ministerial staff positions, and the remaining are not paid staff at their respective churches. Ten of the women have advanced degrees (including two with doctoral degrees), and one is currently pursuing a masters degree. The remaining two women are currently working on undergraduate degrees.

The sample of women selected was purposive in order to gain rich and compelling descriptions of the experiences of African American women in ministry in the AME Church context. This purposive sample was representative of women from inner city, rural, and suburban churches, and the congregation sizes ranged from small to mega. Purposive sampling is conducive to qualitative research which is less concerned with central tendencies of a larger group and more interested in why particular individuals or groups feel a certain way, how their attitudes are constructed, and what role those attitudes play in organizational and group dynamics. The uniqueness of the individual is

⁸ There are two ordination tracks in the AME Church- itinerant and local. Itinerant ministers are eligible to pastor, are free to change churches within the denomination, and the elders are seminary trained. Local ministers can only retain their orders and operate in ministry in the church they were serving at their time of ordination although exceptions are made from time to time.

important when one engages in purposive sampling, and a few well-chosen participants can enrich a study far more effectively than a randomly chosen sample of a larger number.⁹

Criteria for inclusion were established for this study. Each participant had to be an African American woman in ministry in the AME Church which excluded women from other denominations who may have expressed an interest in participating. This delimitation allows for the organizational dynamics at the conference, district, and denominational levels to be considered in the analysis. The women also had to already be in or actively pursuing ordained ministry. Although we are all called to ministry, this study is focused on the distinct experiences of women in ministry who have legitimate authority and are perceived by their congregations as being in leadership. Women who were in the process of accepting a call to ministry but had not been recognized by the church or officially started their ministerial training were excluded.

Methods of Data Collection

This study was originally conceived with the usage of both semi-structured interviews and summative focus groups as methods of data collection. After interacting with potential participants and speaking with ministerial colleagues about the nature of the study, it was determined by the researcher that participant privacy concerns would prevent the use of summative focus groups. Instead the researcher chose to employ the use of member checks as a triangulation method for the purpose of safeguarding the accuracy of the data and the credibility of the study.

⁹ Ted Salys, "Purposive Sampling," *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 70.

Interviews

Potential interview participants who were previously approached at conferences were contacted by email. These women, twenty-two in total, were invited to participate in response to their willingness to engage the researcher in conversation during the conference and the friendliness of their interaction. The initial email communication provided a brief snapshot of the aims of the research, expressed assurance of confidentiality, and shared a link to the researcher's website. The information on the website provided a fuller explanation of research objectives, reiterated confidentiality procedures, and shared information about the researcher's educational, ministerial, and professional background. In addition, initial email offered the potential participants some indication of the type of experience they could expect, the time commitment, and the types of questions they would be asked. All of the women initially responded with an interest in participating in the study. After the initial email communication, subsequent emails to set up the logistics were exchanged. Although none of the women directly declined to participate at that particular time, four were unresponsive to requests to set up meeting dates. Four ultimately were not able to participate in the study because of timing and schedule availability. One other potential participant, although willing to participate, experienced a death in the family and was unable to complete her interview.

The interviews conducted with the thirteen women who were able to participate in the study were semi-structured and in-depth in nature. The researcher opted to utilize semi-structured interviews because this method allows for some control over the topics

discussed without limiting the responses of the participants.¹⁰ The written interview guide created was composed of the same preliminary questions that were provided in the initial email. Although the questions were organized into a predetermined order, the researcher took the liberty of changing the order as it seemed necessary based on the participant's responses. The questions asked during the interview were all open ended and asked for primarily perceptual information as well as a few demographic details. When necessary, probes were utilized for the purpose of drawing out additional information. Semi-structured interviews are quite effective because this method allows the researcher to pose question that ask for concrete information as well as questions that ask for more narrative and perceptual information. The danger with this method, however, is the potential to lead the participant if the question is not phrased properly. Also, the effectiveness of this method to some degree relies on the ability of the researcher to engage in active listening and employ probes for additional information.¹¹

Interview Guide

The interview guide included the following questions that were asked of every participant. Each of the questions were carefully worded and intentionally thought out to suit the aims of the research.

- How long have you served in ministry?
- How long have you served in ministry at your current church home?
- How long had you served when you accepted your call to ordained ministry?

¹⁰ Lioness Ayers, "Semi-Structured Interviews," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 811.

¹¹ Ibid.

The purpose of these questions was to begin to get the participants in a reflective mode which proved to be effective. The act of having to add up the number of years in order to answer the questions automatically led them to recount their experiences. This allowed the researcher to ask follow up questions about their early experiences in ministry.

- What was your relationship with your pastor/ministry leader when you accepted your call to ordained ministry?
- How has your pastoral leadership been supportive of your ministry?
- How has your pastoral leadership been unsupportive of your ministry?
- In what ways has your interaction with members been affirming of your ministry?
- In what ways has your interaction with members been less than affirming of your ministry?

While some of these questions may appear to be leading the participants, wording the questions in this manner was intentional in order to elicit a balanced reflection. If the participant had an overwhelmingly negative view of her pastor or church experience, the order of the questions caused her to reflect back to when the situation was joyful and fulfilling. Making the positives the point of departure resulted in more rational and detailed discussions of the negative experiences. The responses to this segment of the questioning yielded significant insights concerning the link between the participants' experiences with their pastors and/or congregations and their own self-concept. The responses to these questions also spoke to the organizational dynamics and systemic issues that impact ministerial identity.

- Was ministry ever a career option for you?
- Are you where you thought you would be at this point in your ministry?
- Where do you see yourself in ministry ten years from now?
- If you could, what advice would you go back and give yourself as you entered ministry?

Closing with this set of questions allowed the participants to look forward and backward from their current location. The question concerning ministry as a career option was rephrased to “When did ministry become a career option for you?” for those who were in paid full time ministry. These questions prompted the kind of reflection that allowed them to speak to who they were, who they are now, and who they will be in their own voices and not through the voices of other people’s perceptions (although those perceptions still influenced the responses).

Interview Setting

Each of the interviews were scheduled to last approximately an hour to ninety minutes, but all of the interviews went longer by an average of thirty to forty-five minutes. The longer interviewing times can be attributed to the rapport that developed between the researcher and each of her participants, their willingness to share their experiences in detail and on deeper levels, and the comfort of the settings within which the interviews took place. Due to privacy concerns, the nature of the conversations, and the probability of various congregation members recognizing the researcher and/or the participants in public, the researcher asked the participants to choose the location with which they were most comfortable. The researcher also made her home available as an

option. Six of the participants chose the researcher's home, while two others opted to conduct the interview in their offices.

It was important to the researcher to conduct interviews face to face in order to establish rapport and trust, and to be able to read nonverbal cues. Unfortunately scheduling would not permit some of the interviews to take place face to face, therefore the researcher utilized an online meeting platform for the remaining five interviews that allowed both parties to see and hear each other. This did not significantly inhibit the building of rapport or the reading of nonverbal cues.

Interview Styles

Although the researcher utilized an interview guide, a conversational interview style was employed. According to Katherine J. Roulston, conversational interviewing creates an atmosphere where participants feel open to extending the discussions. This technique opens the interview with the kind of casual conversation that usually occurs between people who are meeting for the first time and attempting to establish some level of familiarity. The hierarchical relationship that normally exists between the researcher and the participants is diminished, and participants are regarded as partners who are at liberty to share their insights pertaining to the subject matter. The success of the technique largely depends on the researcher's skill in utilizing conversational strategies including demonstrating flexibility, encouraging reciprocity by allowing for shifts in

topics, entertaining questions from participants, and responding authentically to such questions.¹²

The interviews conducted were also in-depth in nature which greatly contributed to the richness of the data collected. In-depth interviews bear a significant resemblance to the conversations that occur within a trusted friendship because the technique builds upon the closeness that develops between the researcher and the participants. While this interviewing technique may result in a friendship, the situation is significantly different because the researcher aims to utilize the information for a purpose beyond the conversation. In-depth interviewing pursues “deep” information that is significantly different from the type of information generally yielded through casual interviews, surveys, and focus groups. The information shared during in-depth interviews generally pertains to matters that are considered to be highly personal including lived experiences, perceptions, and values.¹³

The deep understandings that result from this method go beyond surface level rationalizations of the phenomena under examination. Commonsense explanations may serve as the starting point of the inquiry but when this method is employed, the ultimate objective is to reveal that which is hidden from plain sight and delve into a more reflective understanding of an experience.¹⁴ In-depth interviews are particularly useful in

¹² Katherine J. Roulston, “Conversational Interviewing,” in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 811.

¹³ John M. Johnson, “In-Depth Interviewing” in *The Handbook of Interview Research* ed. Jaber F. Gubrium et al. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2001, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

exploring varying meanings or viewpoints and when the information sought is presumed and not spoken of on a regular basis by most of the group or organizational members.¹⁵

This method is also appropriate when the research involves a subject matter that evokes highly conflicted emotions or when multiple individuals engaged in the same line of activity possess complex perspectives.¹⁶ Being an African American woman is in and of itself complex, but being in ordained ministry in addition adds another level of complexity to the lived experiences of the participants in this study. The women interviewed expressed a range of strong emotions and shared unique perspectives that they do not always feel free to articulate openly. The conversational methods offered by in-depth interviewing were conducive to establishing the kind of comfort and trust necessary to explore the full depth such deeply held perceptions and emotions.

Data Management and Storage

Nine of the interviews were recorded on an electronic device and transferred to the researcher's laptop computer. Technical difficulties prevented the researcher from recording two of the interviews, and the other two participants declined to be recorded. The recordings were carefully transcribed, and each password-protected participant file (both those transcribed from recordings and those notes taken directly from participants who were not recorded) was given an alphanumeric code so that participant names would not be attached to the transcripts. The device where the recordings were stored remained in the home office of the researcher to which she was the only person who had access. At the conclusion of the research project the recordings were deleted.

¹⁵ Ibid., 105.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Member Checking

This study utilized member checking as triangulation method as opposed to summative focus groups out of concerns for the privacy of the participants and their willingness to take part in such groups. Member checking offers participants an opportunity to assess whether the researcher accurately depicted their experiences and captured the meaning those experiences hold.¹⁷ Essentially participants are able to determine if the researcher faithfully represented their contributions and if their analysis and resulting claims resonate with how they view their experiences. According Margaret Sandalowski, member checking can be included in the primary data when it involves asking for further clarification or summarizing what participants have shared at the end of the interview.¹⁸

Member checking can also take place sometime after the original data was collected, as was the case of this research. When member checking occurs at a separate time from the primary data collection and after the data has been analyzed, it may involve all of the participants or a purposive sample from among the participants.¹⁹ This research utilized a purposive member checking sample from among the participants. Those selected were participants to whom the researcher readily had access beyond the original interview. They also demonstrated the most freedom in giving their honest responses and the least inhibitions when it came to leveling thoughtful and balanced critique of their senior pastors, their church homes, and denominational dynamics. In total, member checks were conducted with six of the thirteen participants, who were presented with a

¹⁷ Margaret Sandalowski, "Member Check," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 811.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

brief summary of the findings once the analysis had been completed. The summary was written and discussed in language that was accessible to its audience. While none of the member check participants objected to the findings, some were exposed to new perspectives they had not considered which elicited further reflection.

Methods for Data Analysis

To begin the data analysis, alphanumeric codes were assigned to each of the participant responses according to the frames or layers that make up the theoretical framework used as the basis for the analysis. Large print sheets containing a brief description of its coordinating frame or layer were attached to the wall and also color coded accordingly. Participant responses were then printed, divided, and attached to the print sheets for the corresponding color and frame. The researcher then began to identify patterns and themes within each frame. Links between themes, either because of similarities or contradictions, were also identified among the data within each of the frames. As themes continued to emerge new print sheets were prepared, color coded accordingly, and attached to the wall.

Once an exhaustive search for patterns and themes was conducted within each category of the theoretical framework, patterns and themes were compared and contrasted across categories or frames. Points of connection were identified and further examined. All of the emerging themes both within and across the four frames of the theoretical framework were brought into conversation with an array of relevant literature. The broad scope of literature utilized for the purpose of bringing interpretation to the emerging themes and patterns included, but were not limited to, works from the disciplines of

feminist theology, womanist theology, and practical theology as well as organizational and interpersonal communication. Throughout the process of the data analysis, the researcher utilized ministerial, academic, and research colleagues to critique the methods and the findings.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness has become essential to the evaluation of qualitative research because it allows the researcher to address qualitative values without the impositions of quantitative research ideals. It involves addressing concepts more suited to qualitative research, such as credibility and dependability, rather than forcing quantitative concepts that do not fit the research, such as validity and reliability. Trustworthiness ensures that qualitative values are evident in the research study and utilizing it as a tool, researchers are able to demonstrate the merit of their work.²⁰

Credibility

Throughout the study, the researcher has the responsibility of maintaining a level of consistency that allows readers and participants to fully understand the reason particular research methods were utilized and participants were chosen. The processes employed in the data analysis should demonstrate connections between participant responses and the emerging themes that are conceivable and persuasive.²¹ To augment the credibility of this study, the researcher utilized member checks after the initial data collection for the purpose of ensuring participant responses were represented accurately

²⁰ Lisa M. Givens et al., "Trustworthiness," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 896.

²¹ Devon Jenson, "Credibility," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 139.

and to acquire their perspectives on the study's findings. Participants were able to determine and share if and how the study's claims resonated with their view of their experiences in ministry. Secondly, the researcher utilized her network of ministers, doctoral students, and professors to discuss her methods and her findings. They were able to raise issues and offer perspectives she may have overlooked.

Dependability

Qualitative researchers investigate an ever-changing social reality, making it difficult to attain reproducibility and reliability in a study. Dependability is the more realistic concept for qualitative research in that it acknowledges the continual change in the research context and addresses this concern through appropriate methods.²² Results should consistently connect to the data and the resulting claims should accurately depict the meanings intended by the participants. If the researcher provides sufficient information concerning methods and procedures, others should have the ability to replicate the study in a similar context.²³ To that end, the researcher took note of any significant organizational or contextual changes that would impact the study. The researcher also shared portions of the coded data with research colleagues to get feedback on her coding methods. Throughout the data analysis, the researcher also kept notes on her interpretations of the responses as it related to categorization and noted shifts in those interpretations.

²² Givens et al., Trustworthiness, 896.

²³ Devon Jenson, "Dependability," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 209.

Limitations of the Study

The chief limitation of this study involves confirmability. This concept is concerned with ensuring that the researcher's interpretations of the participant's perspectives are actually grounded in the participant's perspectives, and that the data analysis and resulting claims are also reflective of that which the participant has expressed. Confirmability does not refute the reality that the researcher's perspectives are brought to the study, but it does require the open acknowledgement of any bias and appropriate methods to account for them.²⁴ Researchers address bias by being truthful about their own assumptions and perceptions, seeking out data that contradicts their bias, and demonstrating a willingness to consider alternate interpretations of data.²⁵

The researcher acknowledges in this study her own biases as an African American female itinerant elder in the AME Church who has served in both of the conferences from which the participants were solicited. Scholars suggest that although member status as the researcher was once stigmatized, it is now regarded as an asset to have member-based knowledge.²⁶ Her experiences serving several churches, being developed by a number of senior pastors, and the "church hurt" she was experiencing at the time of the study offered a unique lens, but it had the potential to negatively taint the research. The researcher accounted for her biases through some of the aforementioned methods including member checking and discussing the analysis and findings with colleagues to ensure her findings were rooted in the participants' perspectives.

²⁴ Devon Jenson, "Confirmability," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 113.

²⁵ Russell Ogden, "Bias," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa Givens. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, 61.

²⁶ Johnson, "In-Depth Interviewing," 107.

Another limitation to the study involved access to the participants. The interviews which were the primary method of data collection proved to be time consuming, and the researcher did not want to be a further imposition on the participants. Time was limited in general for most of the participants especially that were senior pastors and/or bi-vocational. Another consideration concerned the sensitive nature of the study and the information shared by the participants. The repeated questioning involved in follow up interviews had the potential to make participants uncomfortable about what had been shared and cause them to question their decision to participate. The researcher accounted for this limitation by being thorough in the initial interviews, during which she continually asked for further clarification, and frequently referring back to the recorded interviews to assess the tone in a response that seemed ambiguous in the written transcript.

In summary, this chapter provided a thorough description of the methodology utilized in this research. This study employed a qualitative multicase study methodology to examine ministerial identity as it relates to African American women in ordained ministry. The participant sample was purposive and comprised of 13 women who were ordained or pursuing ordination in the Baltimore or Washington conferences of the AME Church. Semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants, and member checks were employed as a triangulation method. The data obtained from the interviews were separated according to the personal, relational, enacted, and communal frames of CTI, and emerging themes were identified. In the chapters that follow, key findings from this study are presented as well as interpretations and conclusions arrived at through comparisons made between the data and prevailing literature.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this multicase study was to examine, utilizing a sample of AME women in ordained ministry, how African American women clergy serving in a black church context construct and further develop ministerial identity. It was the researcher's conviction that a fuller understanding of ministerial identity from the perspective of African American women clergy would give voice to their experiences, inform ministerial training, and equip them with tools of analysis for the purpose of cultivating ministerial identity in healthy ways.

This chapter presents the key findings that emerged from thirteen in-depth interviews conducted with women actively engaged in (or pursuing) ordained ministry in the Baltimore and Washington Conferences of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The findings are organized according to the frames of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) which provided the theoretical lens for examination. The findings were further grouped into themes within each identity frame, which served to further highlight the complexities in the data. Pseudonyms are used here in the reporting of the findings and personal details have been altered out of concern for confidentiality.

Relational Identity Frame

This discussion of the research findings begins with the relational identity frame because it revealed perhaps the most salient information related to the how the women in our study developed and maintained ministerial identity. This aspect of CTI views

identity as being the product of the relationship because identities are enacted in relationships. Identity therefore is mutually negotiated and constructed within the context of a relationship.¹ While relationships with various church members were cited by participants, the most prominent and significant relationships that emerged in the data were those that involved the senior pastor, the pastor's family, and those that were appointed by the senior pastor to positions of authority over the participants (e.g. the assistant pastor). The relational identity frame revealed a strong connection between the development and maintenance of ministerial identity and the relationship each participant had with her pastoral leadership. This included those who themselves were now serving as senior pastors. The relational identity layer also showed a link between the injuries sustained by some of the participants within those relationships and how they see themselves as a result, as well as a few systemic implications. Several significant themes emerged within this frame including those that the researcher has termed engagement/closeness, positioning/acknowledgement of gifts, church hurt, and power.

Engagement/Closeness

The engagement/closeness theme demonstrated the greatest impact on the participant's ability to sustain ministerial identity. All of the participants expressed strong emotions when responding to questions concerning their relationships with their pastoral leadership, in both positive and negative situations. Many participants cited the close relationships they were able to achieve with their pastoral leadership and the way

¹ Hogg, *Communication Theory of Identity*, 117.

ministry was modeled before them as having a profound influence on their ministerial walk and their perceptions of ministry. The intimacy they were able to develop not only involved their pastors, but the pastor's family as well. Several used the language of a parental relationship to describe their level of closeness and expressed the kind of familial love that sometimes eludes even blood relatives.

Rev. Pastor and I developed a wonderful father daughter relationship. He was a loving, nurturing disciplinarian. He cared about me and my ministry. He was the foundational source just for me coming into ministry. I was there the whole time until I was sent out to pastor. He would sometimes share personal things with me, and seeing what he went through, seeing them be a blessing to them [the people], even when they were horrible... If I had questions we would sit up at that church sometimes until midnight. He would just take that time to mentor me; to make sense of what I couldn't make sense of. (Salome)

I can honestly say that God was aligning everything for him to be my father in ministry. I don't have a relationship with my father as it should be, and I didn't really fully understand what a father in ministry was. That had to grow on me because I really had to open up to him. And like, that is my dad now. When I say I am really blessed to have a father in ministry like him... I mean he grooms me, he will tell you what is wrong, what not to do, he will chastise you but pick you up and brush you off and love you to the fullest and our relationship has grown since then... I have one of the best parents in ministry I could have... Also his marriage between him and his wife inspired me. It's more than just me and my marriage. I see how they have come through [being] a young couple until being who they are now and the struggles that they've come through. For me to be in that same situation. I've been married for a while now and I have children. That's going to grow with me in my ministry. (Hannah)

These senior pastors created for the participants a nurturing environment that involved not only parental caring, but instruction and correction that was welcomed and received. They also modeled a life in ministry that the participants found immediately applicable to their own lives and informed their understanding of what it meant to do

ministry. Some of the familial relationships that participants developed with their senior pastors and their families involved a friendship component despite the imposition of hierarchy that is pervasive in the AME Church.

So our relationship was in the beginning, that of student-teacher. We always got along and had a good flow. That was never a problem. As time went on it became more friendship-teacher where I was adopted into their family and would hang out, go over, and go to dinner. They became more like my family. Still always pastor, but now rev-pastor-family. (Deborah)

My relationship was a little unique because his wife was my friend and I worked basically with her from the moment they arrived at Bethel and I was her armor bearer for a while and all that stuff. So I had an intimate relationship with the first family... They just have always been there. Through my divorces, marriages, through pregnancy, I have always been able to talk to them. After my second divorce, my pastor had me to come out to the house to do a one-on-one with me because he just felt I needed some one-on-one spiritual father/spiritual daughter counseling. Always supportive. (Tamar)

Not all of the participants had the opportunity to develop relationships with their pastoral leadership. Several participants cited a total lack of engagement on the part of their pastors and no real demonstrated interest in their development as ministers. For some of these participants, the lack of engagement not only meant the absence of a close relationship, but in several instances it also meant that access to information and significant opportunities was greatly diminished or blocked altogether.

I have not seen that mentorship, that guidance, that leadership that you would expect to receive. With Pastor, he's been responsive, so if I ask something he'll give answer. He's very direct, very short, he doesn't spend a lot of time conversing. He's yes or no. (Ruth)

When I ask Rev. Pastor questions, he gives me some pious ridiculous answer...no real type of steps he took to get to this [level]. It's like 'I just got the gift that no one else has.' I think he's missed out on developing people... not sitting down

and having long conversations. He missed opportunities because he allows his cockiness to be entangled in the moment... He pulls his strings to a level of comfort he can handle to act like he's doing things when he is really doing very little... (Rebekah)

For some participants, their desire to connect with their pastor was impeded by the pastor's relationships with other ministers and members of the congregation. For example Leah recalls, "It was not easy to get support because she'd (the pastor) brought over a lot of people and she wanted to support her own people." For a few others like Elisabeth, connection to leadership and access to opportunities only came to those willing to pay certain personal costs that were not necessarily in line with their authenticity.

I also remember I never connected with Rev. Assistant Pastor; that was one person I never connected with...and I watched those who were in his circle getting used. And I remember I almost was trying to make myself be in that circle, but I never connected there. So I kind of felt I had to become that, but that wasn't my personality. So I said well I guess I won't be there. I wasn't going to fall at his feet. I wasn't going to give up my time to follow, to go to everything he was doing...And I basically just wasn't going to lick his feet to be in that crowd. (Elisabeth)

Positioning/Acknowledgement of Gifts

Closely related to the engagement/closeness theme, was the theme the researcher labeled positioning/acknowledgement of gifts. The data connected to this theme were related to the pastors' acknowledgement of the participants' skills and the opportunities made available that allowed them to function and operate in their area of gifting. This includes being positioned in roles that allowed participants to be intentional about cultivating their gifts and developing ministerial confidence, while also establishing ministerial and leadership authority in the eyes of the congregation. For example Rachel

recalls, “First thing Dr. [Pastor] told me was, ‘I’m going to let you hone your skills and do whatever it is God has called you to do.’” In several instances, the senior pastor pushed the participants beyond their own perceived limitations so that they would learn to embrace and function in the gifts that the pastor recognized they possessed.

Whatever I did in terms of ministry he would say submit your plan and go forth in it. And even when I didn’t want to do it he would push me in it. There were times I struggled because I didn’t want to be a leader...He gave me so many opportunities both inside and outside the church. (Salome)

He’s a teacher and administrator so the smallness of the church made you learn everything because there weren’t a hundred people just on staff trying to get his attention. You got various assignments that made you go step out there and try this and try that. And because it was a small congregation you wore more than one hat. It was never just one thing, it was two or three things. (Deborah)

She (the pastor) put me in place in the media ministry not just because she had a need, but because she recognized I had a particular gift and anointing for that. Giving me the opportunity to do it on a conference level and recognizing me for that and not having any problem making that known...Even though we didn’t particularly like it, but making people work their gift. (Leah)

Pastor, she’s the one who to me I was called to ministry, and she kept putting me in position until I realized the call and the gift. She gave me so many opportunities and experiences. She puts me in position teaching, bringing the morning message which allowed me to feel comfortable. (Anna)

Many of the participants did not necessarily receive direct support from the senior pastor in the form of intentional positioning for the purpose of developing gifts. Of those that did not, a few cited instances where they recognized some level of support because the pastor in a small way acknowledged or facilitated the use of their gifts. Naomi was not intentionally groomed or positioned for major leadership roles within her congregation, but was encouraged by her pastor when it came time for her to decide to

start a church. He told her, “you can either wait in line, and you can see the line that’s ahead of you, or you can step out of line and do (start a church), and I think you can do it.” Similarly, Elisabeth did not have much interaction with her pastor, yet she discovered that he recognized her call to ministry as a result of a conversation he had with one of her relatives:

My cousin said, ‘Yes my cousin attends your church.’ And she told him my name. And he said yes I know Elisabeth, she has a call on her life. She’s been called into ministry. I didn’t think he would have even known who I was. (Elisabeth)

Other forms of positioning and acknowledgement of participant’s gifts came in a manner that was much more indirect. For a few, the acknowledgement of gifts simply meant the pastor not prohibiting the participant from utilizing their gifts even though he or she was not necessarily encouraging them. Rebekah says of her pastor, “He allows me to be able to accept preaching assignments which is a very sort of distant and hands off type of support. And...I guess has allowed me to serve in the same capacities as the ordained staff.” In one instance, the pastor seems to utilize the gifts of the participant without openly acknowledging her gifts or being intentional about positioning her.

For a while I was leading [ministry name] and he refused to acknowledge my work, attributing all the efforts to his executive assistant...In small secret ways he did support me at one point I suppose. There were things I was asked to do- teach women’s bible study, preach, teach bible study, lead certain ministry efforts that were visible- even if only once or twice. I knew that these requests were coming from his directives. This was a big deal given the large size of our congregation and ministerial staff, and the few opportunities he made available to the staff to preach and teach. Although he never asked me directly, I suppose it was his way of throwing me crumbs under the table. (Abigail)

One participant cited an experience where the pastor had not made any effort directly or indirectly, to acknowledge or utilize the gifts of the participant. From her perspective as a licentiate, the pastor did not in any way attempt to put her or her colleagues in positions of responsibility in order to exercise their gifts.

The lack of support, the lack of encouragement, the lack of direction or assignment, I think that's really big. With everything that we've had going on...you know, you have three licentiates but yet you didn't give them an assignment or give them any responsibility toward something. I think that's where you get that development and there's been a lack of it. (Ruth)

Church Hurt

Profoundly significant to the examination of data in the relational identity frame is the theme of church hurt. Many of the participants reported experiencing hurtful situations within the context of their relationships with their pastors, even in the relationships that were positive and intimate. Church hurt goes beyond minor disagreements and differences of opinions, but involves the deeply felt wounds participants experienced as a result of the actions of their pastors. A close relationship with the pastor did not prevent church hurt or insulate participants from the pain of the experience. Intimacy was also not a predictor of reconciliation or the amount of time that was necessary to repair the relationship. For a few the church hurt was rectified rather swiftly, but for several others an extended period of time was necessary. As in the cases of Salome and Deborah, some of the participants experienced church hurt as a result of the way their pastors responded to their actions or misinformation concerning their

actions. Yet even in the midst of the strain in the relationships, their pastors maintained some level of connection.

There was one time I wasn't doing what I was supposed to do and he kind of pulled back, and that kind of hurt me. I had gotten tired and wanted something different. We had a talk and everything was okay. He pulled back but he never let me go... (Salome)

There was an incident at the church where it shook me to the core like nothing else had and I stepped away for like 2 ½ or 3 years... you know how people say there's no church like a church hurt?... It involved [another member] lying on me and him believing her. And I'm like I'm your daughter in the ministry and we've been [close] for fifteen years and you didn't even question, you are just acting on what she said. We eventually had a conversation and Pastor eventually said, 'I didn't know that she was lying. I thought that it was...I just didn't know.' He never apologized, but he just said he didn't know... Even in that situation he would still check on me from the time to time...It put my focus back on the Lord is really what it did. It put my focus completely on [the Lord]. (Deborah)

For several participants, their experiences of church hurt went beyond the bounds of a misunderstanding or inadvertent mishandling of a situation. Rather these participants perceived their experiences of church hurt as neglect, intentional exclusion, or a direct and personal attack on the part of their pastoral leadership. A few participants experienced church hurt because of decisions made by their pastors that impacted a group of people, therefore the injury was not necessarily targeted. Elisabeth recalls being a part of the group that was involuntarily released from the ministerial staff at her large church to go serve a smaller congregation. Likewise, Rebekah was one of a group of licentiates that were told, after the church made several lavish purchases, that they would be financially assisted with the costly psychological evaluation required for ordination. Yet

there was one participant, Abigail, who clearly perceived her church hurt as a targeted attack on her individually.

When we got sent to New AME Church, I was disappointed and angry because I was like, ‘How did I get selected in this group? How did I get selected when there were so many people and no one was ever sent out?’ It was a major thing for us to get sent. ... I remember that’s when you felt like you weren’t the popular kid in the class. (Elisabeth)

The psych evaluation incident...I think for me it was the first time that it hit me that he wasn’t interested in developing me period. I remember I was devastated and I think he hasn’t strayed far from that since then...I feel like I have buried so much of it or come to work around it, it’s how I can cope with being there week to week smiling and pouring his water...It’s really what allows me to function while I am there. (Rebekah)

In a ministerial staff meeting Rev. Pastor openly attacked my hair and my appearance, saying it was ‘too much.’ I found out later that his actions were precipitated by the opinions of his wife and his right hand minister, a woman. Neither one was shy about making me feel unwelcomed when I joined the staff. I was devastated and I confronted him privately. He apologized and for a while things seemed okay, but they never were. (Abigail)

Overt Use of Power

Closely related to the church hurt cited by several participants is the way in which some experienced their senior pastors overtly using and in some cases abusing power.

While the overt use of power did not always result in negative consequences for the participants, the pastor’s ability to exert this level of control has important systemic implications concerning the denominational context of the participants. In Rachel’s case, the use of power was deemed to be in the best interest of the church. She says of her former pastor, “He also knows that the people will decide and he’s going to do what’s

right for the people. He will shut stuff down. We are expendable. I respect the respect he has for the people.”

A few participants recognized the power wielded by the pastor, but expressed appreciation for moments of restraint. Leah recalls, “One thing she did not do is publically banish you. She might do it inside the group, but not publically because you were attached to her name.” Yet several participants acknowledged the pastor’s use of power in the context of interpersonal conflicts, and alluded to the privilege that the power dynamic afforded their leaders while limiting their ability to respond. A few even cited the overt use of power in their pastors’ opportunity-limiting actions against them.

Sometimes he will chastise me, won’t say my name, but he will chastise me from the pulpit; and I think a lot of pastors do that. And I don’t really operate too well with that, I need you to come talk to me. (Tamar)

I can’t tell you everything I’m mad about because you might sit me down, so let me just shut up. Let’s be real about it, that’s always the chance you take. So it wasn’t worth it to me at times. (Deborah)

She micro-managed ministry; you can only do what I permit you to do and assign you to do. When it came to my own creativity she would say, ‘that’s not what I see.’ It reminded me of an abusive relationship, ‘you can have no outside relationships outside of me.’ If requests were made, she’d ask ‘why did they ask you?’ We had to put in a request to preach out, not just the church and the pastor, but we had to outline the specifics. And she’d always ask ‘what’s the relationship you have with Rev. [inviting pastor]?’ She was protecting her interest. (Miriam)

I’ve never really been extended the kinds of opportunities I had the skills and the training to do...I still carry the wounds. He recently alluded to that [ministerial staff] incident, saying I was unteachable, I take everything personally, and pretty much that’s why he hasn’t made opportunities available to me. It made me bleed all over again. (Abigail)

Personal Identity Frame

Similar to the relational identity frame, the personal identity frame yielded data that is profoundly significant to the understanding of African American women and ministerial identity. This identity frame is comparable to self-concept- the lens through which one sees oneself, the feelings one possesses about oneself, and/or one's sense of being from a spiritual perspective.² The most salient data that emerged from the personal identity frame could be linked to the how the participants defined themselves as ministers and their kinds of experiences that informed how they see themselves. Secondly, this frame also revealed information that related to how some of the participants initially came to embrace a ministerial identity. The themes that surfaced include divine agency, ambition, identification/empathy, fear/doubt, and alternative forms of ministry.

Divine Agency

Critical to the language the participants used to describe themselves as ministers were the agency and activity of God. The focus all of the participants placed on God related to their ministry activities and endeavors informed their understanding of who they were called to be and how they were called to function in God's church. Several participants, who were particularly gifted in the areas of preaching and administration, openly recognized that their extraordinary abilities came from God alone and expressed confidence in the giver of the gifts by utilizing and cultivating them.

² Hecht, Framework for Health Message Design, 140.

If I go into the room with kings I can work well there, and if I go into the room with the paupers I can work well there. It is the same thing. You know I love people. God has given me that...my everything is not dependent upon those people. It is something that God does down inside of you. (Naomi)

God pours it inside of me and when it comes out, it just comes out. When I'm up to preach, my mind's focus is that I'm here for worship and I'm here for the Lord to allow a fresh Word just to saturate the hearts of the people. One thing that has settled in my mind is that some people will just respect guy preachers more ...they feel like they just got that fire and can whoop... You don't think a woman can do that? ...I'm like you don't know who God can use to preach in any kind of way. (Hannah)

I didn't see it as a gift, I didn't know it was a gift because I couldn't see it. I didn't know how God was really using me. People would just say 'you blessed me.' It was nothing that I have done, it was just something that God blessed me with. Now I realize that it was something that I had to develop. (Salome)

I have embraced this pastoring thing. For the first time I am truly free to be who God had been calling me to be...I am unapologetically excited about what God is doing...God, if this is what you say, I'm good... The Spirit said, "I just want to know if you are available." (Rachel)

I'm still in awe of what God has done. I still can't believe it. Okay now I'm here [in ordained ministry], this is my new phase. I told God, 'You are going to have to lead me because you know how I am.' [laughter] (Anna)

In other instances, participants referenced the spiritual focus that informs their self-understanding as ministers when they spoke of being intentional about remaining within the realm of God's design for their ministries. Some participants referenced the difficulty of remaining focused on God's call in face of forces that try to diminish the call. For example Rebekah says, "I would tell myself to stay focused on the call and I would tell myself to know who you are, walk confidently who God called you to be at all times unapologetically." Other participants cited the struggles of wanting to be or do

something other than God intended and ultimately submitting to operating in ministry in the way they were designed by God to operate.

I never thought I would leave [my old church]. Maybe that's why God said let me move this child, so I can see the call God has on my life. I guess God had to send me out...my thing is that I don't want to be somewhere that God doesn't want me to be. But I also want to make sure I am where God told me to be. So I wrestle with it a lot, constantly going to God like, 'God, am I where you want me to be now?' (Elisabeth)

I still carry a question about my preaching gift because I don't preach like them...One day I said, 'well I can do that. And I was up there trying to really send it. Let me tell you it was like two months before my vocal chords [got back to normal]. But that's not what God had for me to do. That's not me and that's not who I was supposed to be. (Naomi)

When you come into your own and recognize what God has for you is really for you, regardless of when you do it...when you take your brand off the shelf, there's the aha moment. You wanted all these other brands but God had this brand for you...I feel free, I feel light because now that I have found the brand that God has already had for me, I now see choices. I see options where before I felt as though I had none. (Leah)

Empathy/Identification

Chief among the motivations of the participants as it related to operating in ministry was the desire to minister to and impact the lives of people with whom they themselves identified. For most participants, their own experiences were the point of departure in terms of envisioning effective ministry initiatives. They expressed a strong desire to minister to those who were facing similar circumstances to ones they had previously faced or were currently navigating because they believed their own experiences could be helpful and encouraging to others.

I want to be in my niche, I want to be ministering to women- and men- but because I am a woman who has been hurt, and because I'm a woman who's 48, single, with no children, that's a different dynamic than someone who got married at 20 or with kids. (Deborah)

There are people coming from outside of this church that need somebody that looks like them. They're going to need someone they can relate to in that sense...and when I preach I say that's all the Lord using me. I do have a degree, but I have to keep it real with that brother or sister that's coming in off that corner and saying some big words to them, that's not what they want to hear and I've got to keep it real for them in that sense. (Hannah)

My gifts in terms of innovation have really prompted me to look at different models of ministry and to be an architect for women who want to go into ministry, for single women with kids who have gone through divorce...to help them architect their lives...because with all the things I've gone through, I'm still standing. I'm not just standing, but I have defeated and achieved while still standing. I've got some wounds, I've got some scars to show, but I've won the battle. (Leah)

If it's to minister to women, to people who are broken, to people who are lost, and...to folks who have inadequacies like myself, that thought I didn't have that eloquent speech, I don't feel I fit in or fit the part that you would think of a minister... just to be where I can be a servant. (Elisabeth)

Several participants specifically referenced the desire to minister to women who are called to or operating in ordained ministry. In addition to shaping their identities, the challenges these women experienced as clergy equipped them to develop and guide other women who are in the often difficult phase of entering ministry and perhaps starting a church.

I also see myself with a vibrant ministry for women, particularly those in the places I've walked recently as I've tried to navigate my call and wrestle with flesh and blood, the powers that be, and my internal struggles and wrestling. (Rebekah)

I really would like to have an official place to help prepare especially women who would like to pastor because I think I know...and I think I can help them... But I

really would like to help people find location, you know let's pray, let's get the name, let's get the mission, let's do those things. (Naomi)

I've been fortunate to be able to build my ministry by being my authentic self. God has used my personality and even my appearance, things that I have been persecuted for, to draw young women to me, particularly women who are called to ordained ministry. They seem to identify with me and I see myself in many of them which is why I can minister effectively to them. (Abigail)

Ambition

An interesting and unexpected data characteristic emerged out of the personal identity frame that connected to the theme of ambition. While it is not unusual that the participants expressed having ministry ambitions, what was unexpected is how their ambitions were revealed in their language. Most of the participants seemed to use language that downplayed their early ambitions, some of which went unacknowledged until after they did not come to pass.

When I started out, I did not want to pastor and as I went along is when I developed the calling to pastor. I feel like I should be pastoring by now, but I'm not and it's fine because I have a whole lot going on to where it's okay. (Tamar)

I'll be honest, you look at other folks and, I don't want to say it's jealousy, it becomes like a competition. Like, I must be at this level because I came in before this person. I know this sounds so stupid, but like I started this process before this person and look where they are. (Elisabeth)

When I was first called into ministry I wanted to go to school and get my masters and come out of the corporate world and do ministry full time. That's just what I wanted to do. I thought I would be good at it. I thought I would be able to go and not necessarily preach but go and do things, but it just didn't work out for me like that... I never wanted to pastor, I wanted to be over something but never really pastor. (Deborah)

Yet most of the participants employ very bold and decisive language when referencing their future ministry ambitions. Also noteworthy is the fact that several participants cited early ambitions relating to the pastorate, but a number of the future goals referenced here have a much wider reach than the denomination even when the pastorate is included. Their expanded views also include endeavors that extend beyond the bounds of traditional ministry.

Speaking on a national platform. That's basically it. And I'm going to point to this- Kathie Lee Gifford on the Today Show...She talked about how much her husband loved the Lord and how much she loved the Lord. She was not playing. So that's why I'm saying on a national level. That's why pastoring full time has gone away from my mind because I want my ministry to be international and it will be ministry all the time in everything that I do. (Tamar)

God is preparing us for greatness. My steps are so ordered that the demand will be so great that I have to live in the air. God is getting to release us...no forget release, [God is] getting ready to dispatch us...[God is] not going to waste any of the gifts, God says I'm going to use them all...[God says] if you ever put it down where you can see it, I'll breathe on it. God is going to have people searching out for me; the businesses, churches, schools, that need to be brought back to life. (Miriam)

At some point I can see pastoring because I am equipped, but I want to pastor a contemporary church that actually meets people where they are. I just can't see me pastoring a traditional church like most of the AME churches. More than anything, I most certainly expect to have a thriving and active ministry outside of the church that includes preaching, teaching, conferences, and books. In fact I really see that happening before the pastorate quite frankly. (Abigail)

I think right now there are some things that have been awakened in me and I'm trying to head more towards that, which is why I asked Pastor for more opportunities to preach...For some reason I just feel like this is your time. I see myself doing something with the teaching whether it's part time professor or something else. I see myself with a higher degree. I see myself going to class, or even auditing classes. I see myself teaching more and preaching more. (Deborah)

It is worth noting that the youngest ministers among the participants, who are approaching ordination, were bold and intentional when discussing their ministry goals. Unlike the others these participants did not shy away from laying claim to their call to pastoral ministry, and doing so in no way diminished the goals they have established for beyond the pastorate.

I never had any doubt in my mind. I always wanted to pastor. When the Bishop says let's go somewhere, I'm like come let's go...I have a profession too and I still do work, so in ten years I still plan on working and doing ministry at the same time...I want to be pastoring somewhere-I don't care where- and be more established in my professional career. And my doctorate...I always wanted to be Dr. [Hannah], I always wanted to be that. And I want to travel the world. Some personal, but I do want to do a couple of mission trips. (Hannah)

From day one answering my call I saw ministry as [full time] because it was what I knew at the time. Everyone I knew at the time was full time. All the ministers at my church were full time growing up... I think ten years from now within the context of the four walls of the church, I see myself pastoring a church, more than likely one that I have planted. I don't necessarily see myself as an associate on staff, I see myself pastoring. (Rebekah)

Fear/Doubt

An undercurrent of fear and doubt was pervasive throughout the data, but emerged more explicitly to a lesser degree than the other themes. Several of the participants referenced fear in relation to their hindsight reflections of when they first entered ministry. For example if given the opportunity, both Elisabeth and Deborah would go back and tell themselves to be fearless as they entered into ministry because fear has been a major distraction. Similarly, despite being widely recognized for possessing an extraordinary preaching gift, Salome recalls 'going through fits' every time she had to preach. More than fear, doubt was an insidious presence reflected in the data

because it endured long after the participants left the environment where the doubt was first created.

I questioned and second-guessed myself and what God saw in me. It gave me the motivation to seek out some things and do things for myself. I looked for ways to combat what I thought were my inferiorities...For a season I felt maybe God made a mistake, maybe I wasn't cut out for this... Never doubt because doubt slowed me down and I was going in circles when I should have been driving. Doubt says I'm unworthy. Fear immobilizes you, but doubt will get in your mind and completely tell you everything contradictory to what you know about yourself. (Miriam)

I think there had to be some question or doubt because I was not the one to do the preaching. I still carry a question about my preaching gift because I don't preach like them. So does that mean that your preaching style is inferior? (Naomi)

I remember the biggest thing at that time was being invited to be a part of 7 last words. It was like a rite of passage, so not getting invited to do 7 last words. Other people [got invited] and I was like 'how were they selected?'...I think I preached right before then my trial sermon. I wondered if it was something I said, something I did not say, was it my delivery. So it did make me question that because I didn't get asked to do 7 Last Words. (Elisabeth)

Alternative Forms of Ministry

A small but significant group of data emerged that referenced the alternative ways several participants tried to fulfill the call to ministry by alternative means. In an attempt to avoid the call to ordained ministry and in some cases the pastorate, a few participants sought out lay leadership positions or endeavored to use activities outside of the church to answer the call. This data is significant because for a few participants, it points to a concrete decision to embrace a ministerial identity after attempts to pursue other avenues failed.

But God called me to pastor while in seminary. I ran from that and did music ministry. But finally it was like God was telling me, ‘You have to make a decision.’ (Salome)

I was searching and everything I thought I was going to go to help with- steward board, class leader, and all that- it just wasn’t it. It still left me wanting more and somewhere in there it said ‘you’re called’ and I said, ‘no I’m going to go be superintendant this time’ and it said, ‘no you’re called.’ (Deborah)

Matter of fact, I thought opening a Christian bookstore was my answer to the call to ministry. You know because God told me ‘spread the Word’ so the theme for my bookstore was [Bookstore Name] Records and Books- Spread the Word. God, I got ya covered [laughter]. But it wasn’t until later that I felt a call to ministry. (Naomi)

Enacted Identity Frame

The enacted identity frame yielded a small amount of data that primarily complimented many of the findings in the personal identity frame, particular those related to the how participants defined themselves. This identity frame views communication as performance and refers to how an individual’s behavior expresses who they are.³ These findings generally reaffirm through performance some of the findings that emerged through the previously examined identity frames. Participants demonstrated through action a commitment to operating faithfully in ministry. Yet this data also links to earlier examined data related to how participants define themselves by revealing the subtle and indirect ways they authentically assert their ministerial identity and leadership authority.

³ Hogg, Communication Theory of Identity, 116.

Asserting Ministerial Identity

So I'm a young person coming into ministry. No I don't always wear the long skirts down to my ankles. I love jewelry, I like big earrings and stuff like that. Everybody knows me, I wear my heels, maybe six inches or higher. 'Oh your heels are too high. You ought to get some flats.'...I'm not worried about whether I got on a robe or not. That's not what I'm here for. I'm here to preach the gospel simple, full, and free. So that was one of the biggest things they didn't like about me because I'm out of the box. (Hannah)

I wear my big obnoxious natural hair in the pulpit and I preach in my stilettos. But I still minister, I still mentor, I'm still anointed. I still have influence among the congregation because I'm willing to engage them. Who you see in the pulpit is who you get after service...I even wear my hoop earrings on Resurrection Sunday when I know a lot of unchurched people will be visiting because they need to see at least one person who isn't ultra conservative and churchy. (Abigail)

When people would ask I would tell them call me Rev. Lori, and people would just take it as Lori. Excuse me, but I labored for this. I'm not better than you, but I'm here with a purpose. I show up here every Sunday for free. I'm not on salary, we get fussed at for free. Okay, we get work assignments for free. This is a labor of love. Pastor from the pulpit will correct himself and he said from the pulpit 'you all are to call her Rev. [last name] or Rev. [Deborah].' I was like, 'Thank you!' (Deborah)

Being at [my current church] has taught me that...it's something the presiding elder said, no matter what we go through, we're still called to love, we're still called to serve. And I'm starting to realize that I'm not really there to be a friend. I had to grow up in a way that helped realize you have to separate yourself. That was really challenging, but it was an eye-opener. (Elisabeth)

Communal Identity Frame

Similar to the enactment identity frame, the communal identity frame also yielded a small yet significant data set. The communal identity frame refers to the identity of the group or collective in which an individual holds membership. Comparable to the notion of collective memory, the communal layer is indicative of the common stories,

characteristics, and history upon which group identities are based.⁴ The data set emerging from the communal identity layer spoke to the members' collective understanding of how ministers are to function based on tradition. There is a collective ownership of and investment in the church's ministers that is revealed the dominant theme of membership support.

Membership Support

The support of the members contributed significantly to the creation, development, and maintenance of ministerial identity for the participants. Most cited the demonstration of support and encouragement on the part of the congregation as they moved into positions of leadership and authority. Noteworthy is the congregational support of ordination and the deference given to the pastorate which reveals the respect they have for the role of clergy as a part of the traditions of the church. Salome notes that as an associate minister she received encouragement from the congregation when she preached even though they knew she was fearful. When she eventually made the transition to the pastorate, her new church welcomed her with open arms. Similarly, Anna notes when she made the transition to clergy after years of serving in lay leadership, "Genuine or not, the congregation was extremely positive, but my voice had been heard. They said, 'It's about time!'" Most of the other participants also cited instances where the congregation had been overwhelmingly supportive.

Colleagues and the congregation were affirming whenever I preached or taught a class. They'd say, 'you're so anointed' or 'your gifts will make room for you.' It

⁴ Ibid., 118.

was one of the things that kept me going because I had relationships beyond her. (Miriam)

The members and stewards come up to me and come and ask me to pray with them. I've had members ask me what ministry they can join, or if I see them and I feel like we may lose them, I can direct them somewhere else. A few times when I've had an assignment on the pulpit, they are excited like 'we can't wait.' So the members...they keep encouraging me. (Ruth)

The congregation was extremely supportive of the ordination process. And they gave us our props. They still welcome me back in as a daughter of their church. They allowed us to use our gifts and they were proud of us...because these were old line AMEs and they respected the process. (Leah)

Yet in one instance the collective respect for the role of clergy made it hard for certain members to accept as clergy one who had once served alongside them and was now operating in an elevated position of leadership:

I think the thing that makes it affirming is the thing that doesn't. I think first being among them...serving alongside. When I first started to make that transition, it was great, [they felt like] this was one of us...for that, I got a lot of support and encouragement. Once the visible evidence started to come to fruition, those same people also had an issue. I think [it] started to tear me down in subtle ways, and of course it was more impactful because they were people I knew and served with and were once supportive of me. Once it was visible she is serving and she is no longer one of us, I don't know how to deal with her. People make comments to put you back in your place or to make them feel comfortable with you, or to make you feel guilty for moving forward. And I think my interaction with [Peninah] is a great example, [telling me] 'you need to remember where you came from.'

Chapter Summary

In summary, data from individual in-depth interviews uncovered how women clergy in the AME Church constructed and further cultivated ministerial identity. The data also highlighted the kinds of experiences that helped to shape how they see themselves as ministers, both positively and negatively. Extensive use of participant quotations was employed in the reporting of the findings. The use of their own words

offers the assurance that the reality of the participants and the context under investigation is represented accurately in what has been reported.

The relational identity frame revealed that the most significant influence on the participant's ministerial identity was the relationship that existed with their senior pastors. Levels of engagement and intimacy had a profound effect on the participants' perception of ministry and their ability to access opportunities that were critical to their development. When participants were positioned to function in their gifts, they felt supported and were pushed beyond their perceived limitations. Unfortunately the hierarchical power dynamic put participants at greater risk of experiencing church hurt, brought about either by their pastors' actions, which had lasting effects for many.

Secondarily, the personal identity frame revealed that the participants' perception of divine agency at work in their ministries and their desire to minister to those with whom they identified were critical to the language they used to describe themselves and their ministries. They consistently expressed a confidence in God as the giver of the gifts in which they were able to operate, and as a result they submitted to only using their gifts in ways that they believed were in agreement with God's design. Participants also expressed a strong commitment to ministering to those who were facing circumstances similar to ones they have faced. Despite downplaying early ambitions, participants used bold language to reference future ambitions, particularly those that extended beyond the bounds of the AME Church.

The enacted and communal identity frame each yielded small sets of data that supported previously highlighted findings. The enacted identity frame uncovered the

subtle ways in which the participants asserted their ministerial identity which included preserving their authenticity and drawing boundaries in their interactions with the congregation. From their perspective these actions were direct reflections of their commitment to walking in the role of a minister. The communal identity frame demonstrated the cultural and collective respect for the role of clergy in the AME Church, which participants experienced through the various means of support offered by the congregation.

This chapter has presented a number of key findings revealed by this study, which were organized according to the four frames of CTI in order of significance- relational, personal, enacted, and communal. The significant themes to emerge within each identity frame were also highlighted. In the chapter that follows interpretive insights will be presented along with a synthesis and discussion of the study's findings.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how African American women in the Black Church context, specifically the AME Church, construct and further develop ministerial identity. This examination was not intended to be an apologetic for women in ministry or a focused discussion of the gender biases, but rather an investigation of how African American women clergy create a ministerial identity, define themselves as ordained clergy, and develop professional confidence. The hope of this research was to give voice to some of the experiences of African American women in ordained ministry, inform ministerial training, and most importantly to equip women in ministry with tools of analysis to positively reframe their experiences. The previous chapter presented the key findings of the study, organized according to the four identity frames of the communication theory of identity (CTI)- relational, personal, enacted, and communal. This chapter serves the purpose of bringing analysis and interpretation to the findings which are discussed here according to the four research questions. In this concluding chapter, discussion and suggestions for further research are also presented.

Interpretation of Findings

Research Question 1: How do African American women in ordained ministry create, develop, and sustain ministerial identity?

The first research question sought to determine how participants arrived at the point of constructing a ministerial identity and subsequently continued to develop and

sustain that identity. Several participants cited their decisions to accept the call to ordained ministry after failed attempts to satisfy the call in various forms of lay ministry as the point at which they began to see themselves as ministers. Yet the most salient data related to how the participants constructed and further developed ministerial identity concerned the relationship between the participants and their senior pastors. The creation and development of ministerial identity was intimately tied to the level of closeness and intimacy shared between the participants and their senior pastors as well as the resulting opportunities that were made available. Participants that were able to build close relationships with their pastors had access to opportunities and information that others did not. This organizational dynamic between pastor and associate minister made participants vulnerable to the possibility of experiencing church hurt and the pastor's overt use of power, a possibility from which those with closer relationships were not excluded. The existence of this kind of relationship that allows a pastor so much influence and control over associates can certainly appear unorthodox and inappropriate for a professional vocational setting. Perhaps this dynamic is best understood through the lens of several African-based traditions that are deeply embedded in African American culture.

The salience of the data emerging from the relational identity frame speaks to the primacy of the deference given to the pastor in African American church culture. As noted in chapter one, the pastor is highly regarded and wields tremendous influence and power in the Black Church context. This aspect of African American church life is deeply rooted in cultural traditions that express value of age and value of experience. African American culture places a high value on age, and overt demonstrations of deference toward elders is considered a cultural imperative. The cultural assumption is that age is

the custodian of wisdom and experience. Respect comes with age, and those who are younger are expected to “pay their dues” in order to earn respect.¹ This cultural norm is particularly relevant in the instances where participants like Salome and Hannah lovingly described their relationships with their senior pastors using parental language. In the same way adult children continue to show their parents respect and deference, church members and associate ministers in particular demonstrate a similar kind of love and respect for their senior pastors who essentially serves as their resident elder.

Closely related to the value placed on age is the cultural value placed on the wisdom of experience. Long term experience is highly regarded and appreciated because it is assumed that it is accompanied by competence.² The cultural assumption is that experience comes with age, but it is not always the case that a significant age difference exists between the senior pastor and those she is leading. Yet value is also ascribed to the experiences of the pastor who is younger because it is assumed that in order to have attained the office, he must have “paid his dues” and thereby cultivated skill and competence. This is reflected in the responses of those who like Tamar and Deborah described a close friendship component within their relationships with their pastors. The value of experience in part explains why even though a genuine friendship exists, the hierarchy and power dynamic still informs how both pastor and participant interact and relate to one another within the friendship.

Taken together, the value of age and the value of experience as cultural traditions speak to the tremendous influence a pastor has in the participants’ construction and

¹ Nicotera et al. p.83.

² *ibid.*, 79.

development of ministerial identity. In the same way Johnson³ lifts up the Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, sage, and king and McGrath-Merkle⁴ lifts up Gregory the Great as models of pastoral ministry in each their works on ministerial identity, the pastor is lifted up and regarded as the aspirational model of ministry. The participants drew upon the way their pastors operated in and modeled ministry before them as they developed and shaped their own ministerial identity. Salome referenced her pastor's care for the people even when they were unloving. Hannah references not only her pastor's church ministry but also his ministry to his spouse and family as a model of excellence in ministry. Consequently those that did not have this type of relationship with their pastors not only felt the absence of the intimacy, but also lacked a model upon which they could base the shaping of their own ministerial identity.

The data from the relational identity frame shows that ministerial identity is also developed and sustained through the pastor's positioning and acknowledgment of gifts. There is a training component to the close relationship that can potentially exist between a senior pastor and associate ministers. Through observation and discernment, a pastor discovers the particular gifts her associate ministers possess and assists them in that self-discovery by acknowledging the gifts and putting them in position to use them. Leah discovered a gift she had previously not laid claim to when her pastor positioned her over the media ministry and gave her an opportunity to function in her gift on a connectional platform. Anna's pastor recognized she was called to ordained ministry and gave her a multitude of opportunities to teach until she realized the call and her gift. A number of other participants referenced their pastors' acknowledgment as confirmation of their gifts

³ Johnson, *Old Testament Offices*, 182-183.

⁴ McGrath-Merkle, *Gregory the Great's Metaphor*, 379.

and calling. It is interesting to note that participants who received acknowledgement without positioning were somewhat satisfied with their relationships. Conversely those like Abigail who benefitted from some level of positioning but received no acknowledgement were less satisfied with their relationships.

The importance placed on acknowledgement and positioning from the pastor can be linked to the African American cultural value of uniqueness and the concept of “Nommo.” Uniqueness emphasizes and celebrates the individual’s talents and abilities. Although this concept focuses on individual achievement, it is not incongruent with the relational and collectivist ethos of African American culture because it speaks to how an individual fits into and contributes to the whole of an organization and community.⁵ In this respect uniqueness is not intended to breed competition, but rather its focus is excellence for the good of the whole. Even as children, African Americans are socialized to put forth their best efforts without making comparisons to others around them.⁶ The pastor’s positioning and acknowledgement affirms the gifts of the associates and endorses their individual contribution to the whole for the good of the worshipping community and the entire body of Christ. Through positioning and acknowledgement, associate ministers are able to give expression to their uniqueness, develop professional confidence, and obtain an experiential understanding of how their individual contribution adds to the objectives and overall vision of the church.

Similarly, the importance placed on positioning and acknowledgement from the pastor can also be linked to the concept of “Nommo”. Nommo can be defined as

⁵ Nicotera et al., p.52.

⁶ Hecht et al., 102.

generative, life-giving, and sustaining power of the spoken word. Concepts, ideas, and visions are brought into existence through the power of Nommo. It is not simply verbal, but extends beyond the communicative act itself to into the realm of spirituality. Nommo is a performative force that is an ever-present and absolutely necessary component of language. So important is the concept of Nommo to African-based cultures that speech is a required accompaniment to craftsmanship.⁷

This understanding of Nommo speaks to the reason the pastor's acknowledgement was so important to some participants. Several instances were cited where pastors announced to participants and to others their recognition of a call to ordained ministry or a particular gift. Participants found this very encouraging because the announcement was more than recognition, it was performative. A pastor's recognition of a gift bears the performative function of making the gift even more of a reality with the creative force of words. The idea of "speaking into" or "speaking over" a person's life is a valued concept in the Black Church. It is considered part of our responsibility as Christians and especially as leaders within the worshiping community. When a leader speaks into one's life, she recognizes the gifts that reside deep within an individual, calling them forth and helping that person to lay claim to them. This understanding also speaks to the reason that participants like Abigail and Rebekah resented the lack of acknowledgement despite being positioned indirectly by their pastors. Nommo, or the performative act of speaking into the lives of the participants, was a necessary component of pastoral relationships that contributed to the shaping of ministerial identity.

⁷ Nicotera et al., 57.

Research Question 2: How do African American women in ordained ministry define themselves? What language do they use?

Several significant themes emerged from the personal identity frame in relation to how the participants defined themselves as ministers and the language they used to do so. Critical to the language used by the participants was the agency and activity of God in their lives. Their references to the primacy of God's agency were not limited to God's action in creating opportunity, but more importantly their references pointed to being imbued and empowered by God to boldly operate in the gifting residing in each of them. In her 2004 seminal r&b women's anthem "Living My Life Like It's Golden," poet and recording artist Jill Scott writes "I'm strumming my own freedom, playing the God in me, representing his glory, hope he's proud of me." The sentiment of this lyric accurately reflects the spirit of divine empowerment conveyed by the participants as they referenced God's agency.

A number of participants expressed an embodiment of and dependence upon God's movement within them. Through this embodiment they were able to represent the glory of God by operating freely in their gifts. Naomi can confidently work with "kings and paupers," while Hannah fully owns the preaching moment because she knows that what she is "pouring out" is what only God has poured into her. Rachel expressed feeling for the first time that she could truly be who God had called her to be when she became a pastor. Feminist scholar Mary McClintock Fulkerson's explication of John Calvin's idea of the imago Dei offers further insights. According to Fulkerson, enacting the imago Dei

involves living in a manner that exemplifies gratitude and reliance on God.⁸ For the participants, the operation of their gifts is their mode of reflecting the imago Dei. In a denominational system that imposes many constraints through the hierarchical structure, their reliance upon God's agency at work through them offers freedom and permission to audaciously reflect with gratitude the God within.

Also critical to the ways in which the participants of this study defined themselves was their empathy for and identification with others facing circumstances that they once faced. Even participants like Deborah and Leah who were still in the process of giving shape to their vision for ministry linked their future to helping individuals who were experiencing similar hardships to ones they previously overcame. Several participants specifically referenced wanting to minister to other women who were navigating a call to ordained ministry because of the challenges they faced as they acknowledged their own call.

It is important to note that the participants' affinity toward serving people with similar challenges directly services groups that have been marginalized even within the church. Deborah hopes to minister to women like her who are middle-aged and did not have the opportunity to marry and have children earlier in life. Likewise Leah's focus is women like her who have children and have gone through divorce. Hannah shows a concern for reaching the "unchurched" who might not be immediately embraced by more traditional church members. Despite the overwhelming presence of single women, single mothers in particular, present in the Black Church, activities and ministry initiatives in

⁸ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "The Imago Dei and Reformed Logic," in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics* eds Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 101.

African American worshipping communities are continually designed around the traditional family structure. Similarly Sunday morning liturgical practices assume a familiarity with church service, and our respectability politics reject the very people our churches claim to want to evangelize.⁹ The responses of the participants express a desire to serve populations that are routinely overlooked and ignored in ways similar to how they themselves have been ignored.

While the desire to help those with whom one is in community is a basic tenet of Christianity, the participants' empathy for and identification with others can be rooted in the cultural concept of commitment to community. This concept places the understanding of loving one's neighbor as oneself in an African American cultural context. The value of "giving back" to one's community, particularly after attaining a significant level of success, is a strong imperative in African American culture. This belief is exemplified in the clichés and slogans that are often heard such as "reaching back" and "lifting as we climb." In all probability this value has its origins in the concept of "the extended self" which understands ancestors, the unborn, community, and even nature as an extension of self.¹⁰ The participants' desire to help those with whom they identify because of their past struggles in some ways connects to an understanding of the specified population as an extension of self. In serving the populations they identified, they are "reaching back" and sharing with others the lifeline that pulled them out of their struggles.

Perhaps the most unexpected finding related to how the participants described themselves as ordained clergy and the language they used has to do with their future

⁹ Natasha Jamison Gadson, "After the Charleston Shootings, What is the New Normal for Pastors, Churches, and Christian Leaders?"

¹⁰ Nicotera et al., 75.

ambitions in ministry. Several participants expressed early ambitions to pastor that were perhaps present upon entering the ordination process. Unable to attain this goal thus far in their ministerial careers, several participants downplayed the desire and relegated it to something they felt they should do because of organizational expectations and their years in ministry. There is a communal, organizational, and denominational expectation that every minister should have a desire to pastor, despite the shortage of available appointments particularly in metropolitan areas. This expectation is reflected in the ordination process which considers deaconate orders to be a stepping stone on the way to the order of elder. The ordination process, along with the tutelage of the pastor, is designed to prepare every minister for the pastorate with the understanding that each itinerant elder has the potential to be assigned to a church. After becoming an ordained elder, many ministers come into a greater awareness of the limited opportunities available in the denomination particularly for women. This is reflected in the shift in focus from pastoring to other innovative ideas for ministry beyond the denomination.

While this trajectory in ministry is not surprising particularly for women, what is surprising is the boldness and clarity of vision in the language used by participants in describing their future ministry ambitions. Despite not experiencing significant elevation or promotion within their local churches or the connectional church, the participants referenced ministry ambitions that were audacious and extended far beyond the bounds of the denomination. Tamar aspires to a national speaking platform, referencing Kathie Lee Gifford as her example. Miriam envisions a ministry that will place her in such high demand that she will have to frequently travel. Both Abigail and Deborah described

ministry ambitions that primarily centered on ministry in settings outside of the AME Church.

One might question how participants were able to cling to such audacious ministry ambitions despite being limited, and in some cases shut out, from opportunities in their local churches and denominational contexts. Among other explanations, an understanding of the function of time in African American culture is instructive. Time is understood by African-based cultures as being polychronic, meaning time is taking place in multiple dimensions. For example, rhetoric in the Black Church frequently references God going ahead of an individual to align things in the future according to God's will. Rather than time passing, in polychronic cultures humans move through time. A sense of time is based on participation in and observation of the rhythms of nature and life events. As a consequence, one is not necessarily focused on being "on time" as much as "in time"¹¹ This is exemplified in statements such as Deborah's declaration, "For some reason, I just feel like this is my time." By connecting this polychronic understanding of time with the primacy of God's agency, a clearer understanding of participants' willingness to endure disappointment while cultivating even greater ministry ambitions emerges. Their understanding was that their times are in the hands of God. At the appointed time, God will open up doors of opportunity as long as one remains in God's timing. This is exemplified in Elisabeth's reference to being "where God wants me to be."

¹¹ Nicotera et al., 71.

Research Question 3: What experiences, positive and negative, have helped to shape ministerial identity and how have these experiences informed how they see themselves?

The early part of this discussion has already highlighted the emphasis placed on the relationships between the participants and their senior pastors, or lack thereof. Pastors hold a significant amount of influence in the lives of associate ministers in the AME Church, and participants were greatly impacted by these relationships as they cultivated ministerial identity. The earlier exploration of prevailing literature highlighted Park's assertion that ministerial identity is co-constructed between the minister and those to whom ministry is provided.¹² While that was true for the participants to some degree, the findings revealed that the primary partner in co-constructing ministerial identity was the senior pastor. As a result, the experiences participants had with their senior pastors had enduring impact even as several moved into the senior pastorate themselves. Naomi still carries a question about her preaching gift after decades of pastoring because her style was not endorsed by her pastor. The time Salome spent with her senior pastor serves a model and foundation for her own pastoral ministry many years later.

A significant aspect of how the participants experienced their pastoral leadership relates to "church hurt" and the harm (sometimes inadvertently) brought upon some of the participants in the context of that relationship. Deborah stepped away from ministry for three years after her pastor chose to believe misinformation about her that resulted in a conflict. Elisabeth felt rejected by her pastor after being involuntarily sent to serve another congregation. Abigail views her church hurt as a directed attack on her personally after being humiliated by her pastor in a ministerial staff meeting. All of these and other

¹² Park, Ministerial Identity, 9.

instances of church hurt impacted the participants so deeply because these occurrences were perceived as a violation of the personal and professional relationship. In an African American cultural system, relationship is the primary point of departure when attempting to organize and coordinate actions and efforts for the common good.¹³ Primacy of relationships as a cultural value explains why both positive experiences and church hurt had such critical implications and influence as it related to the shaping of ministerial identity. This is exemplified in the undercurrent of fear and doubt throughout the data. As a result of being hurt and rejected by her pastor, Miriam questioned what God saw in her and doubted her worthiness. Both Naomi and Elisabeth experienced doubt that remains an influence years after moving on to a different ministry context. In O'Brien's work which was explored in the literature review, the participants were ultimately able to overcome the ambiguities of their role in order to embrace ministerial identity.¹⁴ Similarly participants in this study overcame their doubts, yet remnants of the experience remained with them and continued to cause them to question their abilities.

Research Question 4: What are the organizational and systemic implications of the ministry context and how have they contributed to shaping ministerial identity?

Based on the findings of the data, several implications emerged concerning systemic functioning of the denominational ministry context within which the participants are situated. Foremost is the complicated interpenetration of traditional cultural values, patriarchal patterns, and hierarchical structure that impacts relationships

¹³ Nicotera et al., 35.

¹⁴ O'Brien, A Study of Ministerial Identity, 216.

and functioning. Because the organization is comprised almost entirely of African Americans, organizational members tend to pull on African-based traditions and cultural values. As previously highlighted, these values include among other things a respect for age and experience as well as the primacy of relationships in organization functioning. Yet these values are superimposed on a hierarchical organizational structure that perpetuates patriarchal patterns by allowing majority male senior pastors an immense amount of control over associate ministers. While there are a growing number of women occupying pastoral appointments particularly in the geographic area covered by this study, their leadership styles tend to mirror their male counterparts because of the imposition of the organizational structure. Similarly, it must be noted that male associate ministers are subject to the same organizational dynamics as the women in this study, however the ways in which those dynamics play out for them are presumably different.

The work of organizational communication scholars Ann Mayden Nicotera and Marcia J. Clinkscales in predominantly African American organizations offers insight into the phenomena of interpenetrating structures. They assert that the interpenetration of contradictory cultural structures produces a multitude of dysfunctional effects which they have termed divergence. Members of African American organizations commonly lean upon their cultural structures during routine interactions within a culturally homogeneous social environment. This phenomenon occurs at a level that is beneath awareness, so members generally are not aware that they are engaging in this practice. Contradictions occur when members invoke rules and resources produced by the organizational structure, and the contradictory values pull toward opposite ends of a continuum.¹⁵ For

¹⁵ Nicotera et al., 72.

example, in every instance of church hurt cited by the participants, the pastors drew upon the rules of the hierarchical structure while the participants continued to draw upon the cultural value that privileges relationship.

These contradictions also speak to the myth of homecoming which dictates that African American individuals have an expectation of finding acceptance and embrace within African American organizations. This is particularly true after individuals have experienced discrimination and rejection in predominantly White organizations. When this does not occur in ways that are expected, the result is anger, disappointment, and disenchantment.¹⁶ We see examples of this particularly with Rebekah's reference to burying her anger in order to function and Deborah's departure from ministry altogether for almost three years. All of the participants had expectations that their pastoral leadership would function in ways that are consistent with the relationship-focused cultural values, in part because the culture of the denomination encourages relationship building between pastors and associate ministers. For their part, most of the pastors represented in this study did function in ways that aligned with the expected cultural values, but when conflict arose they defaulted to the cultural rules of hierarchy in ways that proved to be detrimental to the cultivation of the participants' ministerial identity.

Discussion

Thus far in this concluding chapter of this study of African American women clergy and ministerial identity, we have concluded that the most significant influence on

¹⁶ Ibid., 72.

the development of ministerial identity was the relationship between the participants and their senior pastors. This discussion has noted that the considerable influence the pastors wielded in the lives of the participants can be rooted in African American cultural values that place primacy on relationship and privileges age and experience. These cultural values inform how relationships are formed with pastoral leadership and the level of access, influence, and control that is routinely granted. The African-based concept of Nommo also informs the importance placed on acknowledgement from the pastor, which in turn is performative and brings about more fully the manifestation of the gift being acknowledged.

This discussion has also highlighted the primacy of God's agency as the basis for the language participants used to define themselves as ordained clergy. The embodiment of God's movement within empowered the participants to operate freely in their gifts, and doing so accomplished the task of the imago Dei. Similarly participants defined themselves as ministers in relationship to the struggles they endured and survived. Rooted in a theological and cultural commitment to community, participants expressed a desire to minister to those with whom they could identify because of their challenges. The conception of time as polysynchronic informed the participants' bold and confident language when speaking of future ministry ambitions despite the limitations and disappointments previously experienced in ministry.

This discussion also highlighted the primacy of relationships in order to give understanding to the reason that both positive and negative experiences with pastoral leadership made a lasting impact on ministerial identity. Because relationship is the primary vehicle through which African American organizational members coordinate

efforts and accomplish functional tasks, negative relational experiences breed doubt in one's abilities while positive relational experiences cultivates professional confidence.

Lastly and perhaps most significantly, the discussion in this concluding chapter highlighted the complex interpenetration of cultural, patriarchal, and hierarchical structures and the related rules for social practice. African American individuals in predominantly African American organizations draw upon cultural values and practices that are in tension and contradiction with the values and practices of the hierarchical organizational structure. When pastors shifted away from relational modes of operating and leaned toward modes informed by the hierarchical structure that perpetuates the undercurrent of patriarchy, participants became dissatisfied and disillusioned by the content of the relational interaction which no longer met their expectations.

In light of these findings and interpretations, the researcher offers the following recommendations pertaining to African American women in ordained ministry who are cultivating ministerial identity within a Black Church context. The foremost recommendation is for women to become intentional about cultivating ministerial identity through the lens of divine and personal agency. The findings demonstrated the power and salience of the participants' view of God's activity and agency. This perspective became a formidable force in empowering the participants to operate fully and freely in the gifts. Even in the face of doubt, the recognition of God's agency released participants into the freedom of fully embodying the imago Dei through the use of their gifts. Lischer asserts that women are more inclined to reference the call of God to justify their ecclesial roles because the rhetoric of the call does not diminish the self and provides an overture to a

great release of power.¹⁷ Recognition of divine agency should also empower the acceptance and acknowledgement of ministry ambitions, as evidenced by the data.

Theologian and United Methodist bishop William H. Willimon asserts that unacknowledged ambition is the worst kind of ambition because people seek to fulfill it in underhanded ways.¹⁸ Perhaps early acknowledgement of ministry ambitions would cause women in ministry to become more intentional about claiming ministerial identity and the language they use to shape it, as evidenced by the data.

The recognition of divine agency should necessarily give way to the acceptance of personal agency that is divinely sanctioned. Personal agency suggests taking responsibility for the intentional cultivation of a ministerial identity that is healthy and life-giving. This entails actively engaging in theological reflection and utilizing tools of personal examination such as the methods utilized by Burton and Weinrich to examine the impact of family systems on ministerial identity. Many of these tools and activities are built into theological education as evidenced by the literature review, however women in ministry must continue these practices beyond the degree and the ordination.

Engaging in reflection and self-examination places the onus of ministerial identity back in the hands of the minister without dependence upon the senior pastor to recognize gifting. AME pastor Darryl K. Kearney suggests that rather than “telling” associates who they are, it is a pastor’s responsibility to ask probing questions that facilitate self-discovery.¹⁹ This places the power of Nommo in the hands of the individual, and not just

¹⁷ Richard Lischer. *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*. (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2005).

¹⁸ William H. Willimon. Class lecture, Introduction to Christian Leadership from Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina, September 4, 2013.

¹⁹ Daryl K. Kearney. Interview by author. Personal interview. Washington D.C., April 23, 2016.

the pastoral leadership. Some aspect of this self-discovery should also involve an exploration of self beyond an idealized public image as suggested by the works of both Pooler and Nauta in the literature review. Authentic examination of one's challenges and experiences illumines opportunities for ministry to those who are walking in similar places, as evidenced by the data.

A secondary recommendation concerning the intentional cultivation of ministerial identity involves the systemic practices of the denomination under examination. The AME Church is an institution that is steeped in a rich heritage and treasured traditions. Rather than fighting against the traditions that are so deeply embedded in our functioning, the organization has an opportunity to leverage tradition for the purpose of bringing about innovation and new modes of operating. The concept of traditioned innovation proves instructive for this endeavor. Traditioned innovation advocates for holding tradition and innovation in tension by preserving the aspects of tradition that are affirming²⁰ while leading a two to three percent change, as opposed to radical change.²¹

Board of Examiners (the AME ministerial training institute), connectional conferences, and other aspects of the denomination are as much tradition as they are organizational functioning. Perhaps these and other components should become intentional about building in opportunities for ministers to build stronger connections with other senior pastors. This would augment some of the cultural traditions that some of these practices are built upon, such as value of experience and the primacy of

²⁰ Gregory L. Jones "Traditioned Innovation." Faith and Leadership. https://www.faithandleadership.com/content/traditioned-innovation?utm_source=conceptpage&utm_medium=principle&utm_campaign=traditionedinnovation (accessed April 26, 2016)

²¹ Gregory L. Jones. Class Lecture, Strategy from Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina, May 21, 2014.

relationships, by exposing individuals a diversity of models of pastoral leadership and allowing them to cultivate multiple relationships. Once again these kinds of connections have the net effect of ministerial identity cultivation no longer being the primary responsibility of an individual's senior pastor. The responsibility become that of the individual as she builds relationships and is influenced by multiple examples and voices.

The connection should also become more intentional about creating platforms for associate ministers to operate in their skills beyond their local church. A cultural norm and an organizational practice exists that dictates associate ministers must ask permission from their senior pastor to preach, teach, or function in their ministerial gifts outside of their local church. Although exercised to varying degrees depending on the pastor, this practice speaks to the jealousy and concern many senior pastors have that another senior pastor will pursue their ministers. Intentionally building in opportunities for ministers to assist other pastors would allow ministers to cultivate ministerial identity and professional confidence and provide necessary assistance to smaller churches that are without a ministerial staff. The data supports the understanding that opportunities for individuals to operate in their area of gifting positively contributes to the shaping of ministerial identity. The concerns of senior pastors would also be eliminated because the sharing of gifts and skills would become a built in aspect of organizational functioning.

It is important to note that these types of changes that are being suggested would undoubtedly create several shifts within the organizational culture of the AME Church, some that may not necessarily be welcomed change. If women in ministry, and indeed all ministers, begin to take responsibility for cultivating ministerial identity in the ways that are being suggested, the power dynamic between associate ministers and senior pastors

would automatically shift. Not only would more opportunities become available to associate ministers within and beyond the denomination, but associate ministers would operate in the knowledge that they have the power and the option to create such opportunities for themselves. This would greatly influence the extent to which associate ministers are willing to wait for acknowledgement and opportunity (and pastoral appointments) as well as their reliance on their senior pastors to provide it. These shifts would force a new organizational imperative that demands respect for and demonstrated value of the gifts and contributions of ministers who serve beyond the pastorate. Such systemic changes would also contribute to the continued struggle to undo the patriarchy and other systems of control that inform the denomination's ways of functioning. The power to define ministry would no longer rest exclusively in the hands of mostly male influential pastors and denominational leaders, and the image of how ministry should look would significantly expand. When associate ministers are able to name their own gifts and create opportunities for themselves, the threats of being controlled or even dismissed by the senior pastor are greatly diminished because other options for actively engaging in ministry would always be present.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how African American women in ordained ministry construct and develop ministerial identity in the context of the Black Church. In summary this chapter addressed the research questions by offering explanation and interpretation of the most significant factors in the cultivation of

ministerial identity. This discussion reveals that the primary factor impacting ministerial identity development is the relationship with the senior pastor and explores the various ways in which that impact is felt. This chapter also connects aspects of that relationship and its resulting impact to African American cultural traditions and values. Lastly, based on the findings and interpretations, the research offers several suggestions for women cultivating ministerial identity and the organizational systems within which that process occurs.

The researcher acknowledges that what is presented in this study is merely one interpretation of the phenomena under examination and recognized the subjectivity of the claims and interpretations. It is the hope that other researchers and scholars would take up the task of exploring and examining the lived experiences of African American women in ministry, ministerial identity, and the Black Church context. Perhaps through longitudinal studies, larger research samples, and the inclusion of other denominations, the intersection of these three areas of study may provide fertile ground for future research. There is a void and a need for the kind research that accurately gives voice to the experiences of African American women clergy, informs ministerial training, and provides necessary tools of analysis, just as this study has endeavored to do.

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Biography

Natasha Jamison Gadson is an ordained itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She holds a B.S. in Business Administration from Morgan State University, an M.A. in Organizational Communication from Howard University, a Master of Theological Studies from Wesley Theological Seminary, and in the spring of 2016 she completed a Doctor of Ministry degree at Duke Divinity School.

Trained as an organizational development consultant, Natasha launched KerygmaWord Inc. in 2007 to serve as the umbrella for her preaching, teaching, and consulting activities. Over time the brand has evolved to accommodate her passion for developing women entering ministry. Natasha has been privileged to teach courses in communication and business at Howard University, Prince George's Community College, and University of Maryland University College, as well as write for several publications including Duke Divinity's Faith and Leadership. Born and raised in New York, Natasha currently resides in Maryland and serves on the ministerial staff at Reid Temple AME Church North in Silver Spring, Maryland.