EARLY CAREER ATTRITION OF SEMINARY GRADUATES: EFFECTS OF PERCEIVED
FIT, EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES, FINANCIAL DEBT, AND MENTORING

By

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ABSTRACT

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This study explored the early-career attrition of 17 seminary graduates. A high rate of
seminary graduates leave ministry within five years of graduation. Teachers, nurses, lawyers,
mental health workers, student affairs professionals also leave at high rates during the beginning
years of a career. The present study is an attempt to understand some of the influences on
decisions to persist or quit. Using the construct of perceived fit (Kristoff-Brown & Billsberry,
2013), I explored the career trajectories of nine graduates who persisted in ministry and eight
graduates who left ministry. Perceived fit was complex but influenced decisions about whether
or not to accept an initial assignment. Persistence in an assignment was shaped by the
meaningfulness of work.

The goal was to discover how life experiences contributed to the ways seminary
graduates thought about ministry during an at-risk career phase. Key life experiences included
mentoring, seminary faculty relationships, laboratories, self-care strategies, and managing
student loan debt. Other important findings included the role of early church experiences, college
leader interaction, the need for supportive organizational cultures, and a reimagination of the
ministry license process.

There were key differences between graduates who persisted in ministry and graduates
who left ministry. Two key differences were the early clarification of call and personal initiative.
Furthermore, this study provides a context for future discussions related to the cost of a graduate

education, future career decisions available to seminary graduates, and the burden of school debt on the decision-making processes of ministers.

This study suggests seminaries should consider providing financial literacy training to all students, include a more realistic picture of potential income as a pastor, and give greater attention to encouraging personal initiative in ministry training and development. Additionally, seminaries should consider broadening the scope of theological education to include persons who are not pursuing pastoral ministry.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family: Julie, Jack, and Ella.
All things are possible!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2015, more than 68,000 students in the United States attended graduate programs accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). These institutions are often called seminaries. An accredited bachelor degree is required for admission into an ATS accredited institution. Since 2010, accredited seminaries annually awarded 14,000 graduate degrees to those preparing to work in ministry. During the same time frame, approximately 10,000 Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degrees were annually awarded. The M.Div. degree is a professional, graduate degree consisting of more than 70 semester hours. The M.Div. is geared toward preparing women and men to immediately serve as pastors in churches. The M.Div. is also a standard pre-requisite for admission into ATS accredited doctoral programs, which is a standard requirement for those who plan to teach future ministers.

One might then imagine these accredited institutions graduating a class of 100 students. As the graduates left the arena with their diplomas in hand, they posed for pictures with favorite professors who invested in them and prepared them to serve in local churches. The graduates scattered across multiple states, each hoping to make an impact and looking for the perfect place to start a ministry career. Each graduate felt ready to prove to appropriate leaders that they were the right fit for a church. District superintendents interviewed graduates, decided whether the graduates were a right fit, and warranted consideration for placement. Ministry positions were offered to many of the new graduates. Other graduates continued searching, hoping, that they too would be called to pastor and fulfill their callings.

When they graduated, each individual was passionate about becoming a pastor. They had completed a minimum of seven years of full-time, academic preparation. Each had grand hopes and dreams—they wanted to make a difference. However, five years later a quite different reality

emerged for these graduates. Over eighty of the 100 graduates chose to permanently leave the ministry (Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Meek et al., 2003; Oswald, Heath, & Heath, 2003; Spencer, Winston, & Bocarnea, 2012; Stewart, 2009). Five years following their graduation from seminary, only 15 of the 100 graduates were employed in any ministry related field.

Purpose of Research

The reported rates of attrition within the profession of ministry represent a significant problem for those responsible to prepare clergy, to provide ongoing professional development, or to facilitate the placement of qualified pastors in local churches. It is also a significant problem for the individual graduates, churches, denominations, and families. Recent graduates are choosing to permanently leave the ministry within the first five years at an 85% rate, yet very little is known about the experiences during those first five years. The purpose of this research is to better understand the lived experiences of seminary graduates during their first five years of ministry by looking at their ministry experiences through the construct of perceived organizational fit (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013).

Background and Rationale

The problem of persistence and attrition in the professions has occupied researchers and policy-makers for a long time (Cherniss, 1995; DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Margolis, 2008). Between 50% and 75% of beginning nurses (Crow, Smith, & Hartman, 2005), 64% of beginning mental health care workers (Kwok, 2013), 43% of beginning lawyers (McDonald, 1998), 50% to 60% of beginning student affairs professionals (Silver & Jakeman, 2014), and 50% of beginning teachers (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011) permanently depart their chosen careers during the first few years of beginning their respective careers.

Why do people leave the professions? Human service and public sector workers research found that differences in organizational culture and conditions influenced attrition and persistence decisions (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). Where positive organizational conditions and culture existed, retention was more likely. Organizational conditions and culture included both objective factors and perceptions. Again, implicit in the research, workers who left their careers were influenced by their negative perceptions of the organizational conditions in which they worked. Workers who persisted were influenced by their positive perceptions of the organization.

One way that schools addressed the attrition of beginning teachers involved implementing teacher induction and mentoring programs (Long et al., 2012). Long et al. (2012) found that mentoring programs, when intentionally designed around the explicit support of both veteran and beginning teachers, were most successful in addressing attrition. The least successful mentoring programs focused on supporting either the new teacher or veteran teacher, often at the expense of the other. The most successful induction programs included supportive school cultures, which were highly collaborative and valued beginning and veteran teachers' knowledge. Rippon and Martin (2006) found that mentoring programs helped new teachers feel like they belonged. When new teachers lacked a sense of belonging, they perceived that they did not fit in (Rippon & Martin, 2006). The perception of misfit indicated the possibility of leaving their teaching career. Their perceptions of fit were based on the congruence between their respective desire to make a difference in a student's life and the feeling of support they received from the school.

Higher education attrition. Similar concerns with regard to attrition are manifest in preparation programs in higher and adult education as well. Student attrition within traditional

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and non-traditional higher education programs (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 2012), vocational, and adult education programs (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Donkor, 2012; Lohman & Dingerson, 2005; Masdonati, Lamamra, & Jordan, 2010) have been research foci for many years. Roughly half of all undergraduate students do not persist to graduation (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). Non-traditional, adult students, age 25 and older, experience a higher attrition rate than traditional undergraduate students (Bergman et al., 2014). While higher education research is related to the overall attrition focus of the study proposed here, I will focus primarily on the problem of professional attrition.

Attrition research related to higher education focused on institutional or student characteristics (Tinto, 2012; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, 2000). Institutional characteristics, such as faculty involvement with students and first-year student orientations, have been two facets of previous higher education attrition research. Student indicators related to attrition have included such characteristics as GPA and family background. However, Tinto (2006) distinguished a transitional moment in attrition research. Initial attrition research focused on individual student attributes, which resulted in a "blame the student" approach. Attrition research shifted its focus and began accounting for how the organizational environment influenced student decisions to depart from school. The shift required researchers to understand "patterns of interaction" (p. 3) between students and organizational environments. Understanding these patterns required higher education institutions to more sufficiently and intentionally address attrition problems.

Related to the present study, Willcoxson and Leslie (2010) found a critical issue directly associated with long-term university retention: when a student made a clear choice of major and career, the clarity of those choices led to greater persistence and less attrition. The issue is related

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to the present study because those who enter ministry have made a clear choice of major and career. Evidence of clarity is a 7-year commitment to preparation. In spite of this clarity, however, there is still an 85% attrition rate. While clarity of major and career choice increase persistence in higher education, clarity of major and career choice do not support greater levels of persistence in ministry. Missing from the research related to ministry attrition is a description of how seminary graduates interact with their ministry environment.

      Why are ministers leaving the profession? For example, proposed solutions to attrition used in education, teaching, legal, social work, and health care do not address attrition within ministry. There are in excess of 217 denominations in the United States (Lindner, 2012). Several denominations are concerned with the attrition of clergy (Hoge & Wenger, 2005). Carroll and McMillan (2006) predicted there will be clergy shortage in the future. The profession of ministry has addressed attrition by emphasizing professional development (Olson, 2009). Denominations are increasing requirements for clergy reporting of professional development hours (Olson, 2009; Reber & Roberts, 2014). Opportunities for structured mentoring, which increased persistence among early-career teachers, have been limited because of ministry isolation and alienation (Hoge & Wenger, 2005). Meek et al. (2003) focused their research on identifying some of the stressors that caused decisions to leave the ministry. They found that pastors departed because they felt alone and needed partnerships.

      Previous research posited that 50% of seminary graduates dropped out of the ministry within the first five years of beginning ministry (Meek et al., 2003; Oswald et al., 2003). More recent research from Duke University, however, found 85% of individuals who had successfully completed the rigorous seminary training for the ministry permanently left the ministry within their first five years. Later studies corroborated these findings (Spencer et al., 2012).

Hoge and Wenger (2005) found ministers were motivated to permanently depart ministry for complex reasons. The reasons could be grouped around seven main motivations: wanted a change, conflict in the church, conflict with denominational leaders, family care, burned out/discouraged, misconduct, and marital problems. Stewart (2009) also identified seven causes of ministry attrition: ill-preparation, lack of connection with other people, inattention to issues of self-care, "ministers assigned to congregations that were too dysfunctional to be pastored well" (p. 114), finances, conflict, and lost their way. Ministry attrition is too complex to reduce to a single cause. Rather, attrition is usually the accumulation of multiple causes.

Hoge and Wenger (2005) posited the initial placement of a pastor in a specific church, and the ways a specific church decided whom they wanted as their next pastor, were critical to the process of establishing longer ministry tenures. They suggested the process of how a pastor went to a specific church was important and should be studied. They found pastors placed in a wrong assignment experienced frustration and chose departure. Stewart (2009 described pastoral misplacement as when pastors were placed in churches where the organizational environments were not conducive to their respective skills. The misplacement led the new pastor to experience frustration and eventually that pastor became an attrition statistic.

In Hoge and Wenger's (2005) research, pastors who left ministry implied a perception of misfit to their organizational context. For instance, one commented, "The church never accepted my family or me" which may imply a perceived misfit between the pastor's family and the church. The former pastors may have perceived a lack of fit to a particular church in comments like "the church was too rural for me," or "I was not a blue-collar kind of pastor that the church wanted," or "I never got a plum assignment."

While previous researchers did not use the specific language of fit, they made explicit distinctions between desirable and undesirable church assignments, thriving or stagnant church assignments, or problem and non-problem church assignments (Burns & Cervero, 2004; Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Meek et al., 2003; Stewart, 2009). Klaas and Klaas (1999) suggested placing a scholarly type of a pastor in a rural setting may lead to a mismatch between a pastor and congregation. Stewart (2009) referred to some churches as too dysfunctional to be pastored well. These types of comments and findings may also imply if seminary graduates perceived a right fit with the church some may have persisted in ministry.

Hoge and Wenger (2005) found seminary graduates were usually placed in rural/under-resourced church settings because those were beginning assignments. While these "first" congregations expected seminary graduates to be innovative, these same churches often resisted innovation. The resistance between a pastor's and the church's espoused and enacted expectations generated conflict, dissatisfaction, and created a sense of mismatch. Klaas and Klaas (1999) posited mismatches between a pastor and local church caused both the pastor and the congregation to become dissatisfied. Previous career attrition research established dissatisfaction as one of the motivating factors in the decision to leave any career and, more specifically, to permanently depart ministry (Burns & Cervero, 2004; Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Klaas & Klaas, 1999; Meek et al., 2003; Stewart, 2009).

While Hoge and Wenger (2005) posited that an enhanced placement process of pastors might help decrease attrition and increase persistence, the attrition rate of seminary graduates remains a concern. Furthermore, there has been no research on how seminary graduates experience the transition from seminary to placement in a ministry assignment.

The leaders responsible for the placement of pastors, usually called Superintendents or Bishops, often use the language of fit to describe pastoral placements. However, very little is known about how the notion of fit is constructed. Previous research implies fit is a construct that may be connected to attrition and persistence decisions. While implied in the research on clergy attrition, previous studies do not provide a clear sense of how recent seminary graduates understand fit. In order to promote a better fit, or avoid misfit, between a potential pastor and a local church, more needs to be understood about the experiences of seminary graduates. Particularly, more needs to be known about their experiences by examining how they construct their notion of fit.

Theoretical Framework

While fit is a concept implied in clergy attrition research, it has never been explored. Organizational fit research suggests the "fit" between a person and her/his organizational environment influences job or role satisfaction, motivation, performance, and long-term commitment to an organization or profession (Ostroff & Judge, 2012). However, while the term "fit" is ill-defined in the literature, it is also one of the most used constructs in industrial and organizational psychology (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). A nuanced definition of perceived fit reflects "something inside a person's mind that influences that person's thoughts and feelings about an organization" (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013, p. 4). Lewin (1935) suggested behavior, in this case the decision to permanently leave ministry, is a function of both the person and the organizational environment. There has been a long interest in the role of organizational fit and its relationship to the retention of workers (Schneider, 1987). However, more needs to be known about how the notion of fit within the ministry is constructed by persons who are experiencing "fit."

This inquiry will be informed by the construct of fit, an admittedly somewhat subjective term (Cable & Judge, 1996) which also refers to what is sometimes called person-organization/environment fit (Cable & Judge, 1996; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). In higher education, for example, fit is a word used in such ways as to describe the "right fit" between a student and campus. In vocational training, fit has been a word used to describe the relationship between a person's interests and career choice (Holland, 1985). In business literature, fit has been variously used to describe the relationship between person-task; person-group; person-values; and person-environment (Cable & Judge, 1996; Ostroff & Judge, 2012). In popular literature, the use of the phrase "the power of right fit" describes where and when persons utilize their specific strengths on a regular basis in their context (Rath, 2010).

I suggest the construct of fit between a seminary graduate and a congregation is one component in a complex phenomenon that results in 50-85% of clergy attrition. Exploring the experiences of seminary graduates through the construct of fit helps to address research gaps in both organizational/industrial psychology and ministry attrition.

Personal Perspective Related to "Fit"

To help convey the salience of this concept of fit, I provide a brief anecdotal summary from own experience seeking and obtaining a ministry position. I was thrilled to graduate from seminary. My graduation marked the completion of seven consecutive years of full-time study post-high school. I spent the first four years at a private, denomination-based, liberal arts university and the final three years finishing a seminary master's degree.

The first church I interviewed at after graduating from seminary was in a rural area of Washington. I grew up in Los Angeles and spent part of my childhood living in Ecuador. The church where I interviewed was located on a two-lane highway at the midpoint between two

small cities. The cities were nine miles apart and one hour from a major city. The total population of the area was 5,000 people. The interview went well. The church was ready to hire me. However, the person most responsible for the decision to place me as that church's pastor was the District Superintendent. He told me he did not think the church was a right fit for me so would not place me there. He explained his perspective, being a city kid, he did not think I was rural kind of pastor. He did not see me fitting this particular church and culture.

Later in ministry, a District Superintendent contacted me about a church. He told me I was a "perfect" fit for the church he had in mind. I ended up being hired as that church's pastor. It was a miserable experience. The experience left me so dissatisfied I explored permanently leaving ministry.

Two District Superintendents used the language of fit to describe placing pastors in local churches. The notion of "fit" seems to be common parlance, but very little is known about what people mean when they use the term "fit."

Imagine a school board interviewing prospective superintendents. At the end of the interview process the board chooses one candidate and releases a statement, "Out of all the candidates, this one best fits our district." There is an almost intuitive sense that "fit" is important and relevant, but little is known about how people construct their notions of fit or what these various conceptions might imply for effectively addressing professional attrition.

Research Question

The purpose of my study is to develop a better understanding of the experiences of seminary graduates. Particularly, the study seeks to understand those experiences through the construct of perceived fit.

Perceived fit is a psychological-construct primarily in the minds of those seminary graduates who are making decisions about whether or not to persist in ministry. Exploring the experiences of seminary graduates, through the construct of perceived fit, requires an in-depth qualitative study. The goal is to provide a description of seminary graduates' experiences and how they construct their notions of fit. The following research question will guide the study: How do life experiences contribute to the ways seminary graduates think about ministry?

Definitions

The following definitions help contextualize the study and terminology used when writing about clergy attrition: denominational polity, minister, calling, pastor, and perceived fit/misfit,

First are the terms denominational polity. Different denominations establish different procedures by which a person becomes a member of the clergy and receives recognition as a minister. The requirements necessary to become a minister are part of a denomination's bylaws or polity. Each denomination is different. The process generally includes academic preparation, multiple interviews with denominational officials, and a required number of years of service as a minister prior to ordination. The levels of educational preparation, length of service time in a local church, and number of required interviews vary from denomination to denomination.

Second is the term minister. Minister refers to any person who is considered a legal member of the clergy. A minister may serve in a variety of roles outside of a local church, including chaplain, professor, or counselor. During the process of receiving ministerial credentials, clarity of vocation is established. Generally, a person is not granted proper ministry credentials without articulating an explicit clarity regarding the ministry vocation. Within ministry, the clarity of vocation is usually referenced by another term: calling.

Third is the term calling. In ministry, the calling is much more than a person's clear, articulate expression of a career choice. For many ministers, the call is a pivotal spiritual moment (Foster, 2006; Willimon, 2000). Ministers are often asked by denominational officials and local church or district boards to articulate their call. Applications for ministry credentials often request a description of a call into ministry. Often times a person enters ministry with the belief that a call is to a lifelong vocational ministry (Foster, 2006; Hoge & Wenger, 2005). Receiving a credential to practice ministry usually requires the clear articulation of that lifelong call. Previous research, within higher education attrition, posits that when clarity of career exists, there is less attrition (Willcoxson & Wynder, 2010). If accurate, the capacity to clearly articulate a call into lifelong ministry combined with the commitment to invest time, resources, and energy over a number of years in academic preparation, there should not be an 85% attrition rate of seminary graduates.

Fourth is the term pastor. Any minister who serves in the context of a local church with specific responsibilities within that local church. In the context of my study, a pastor is also a person who receives some form of compensation from the local church. A pastor's compensation may come in forms other than money. A pastor in the context of my study also has graduated from seminary.

Finally is the phrase perceived fit/misfit. Perceived fit/misfit is one of two specific paradigms within the broader organizational fit research (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). The perceived fit paradigm shifts the study of organizational fit away from quantitative approaches to assessing fit (paradigm one) and focuses on the person who is experiencing or not experiencing fit (paradigm two). These two paradigms are explained in the framework section of chapter two. Perceived fit/misfit is a psychological construct located primarily in the mind of the

person who decides whether fit exists or not (Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones, & Marsh, 2005; Billsberry et al., 2010; Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013).

Significance

First, the study will contribute to a larger scholarly discussion on organizational fit by describing the ways individuals construct their notion of fit. Second, describing the construct of fit will contribute and bring some clarity to the definitional battles in the research literature about the term "fit."

Third, if the psychological construct of fit is better understood, in light of pastoral ministry, it may become possible to better prepare and help new pastors in the transition from seminary into professional work. Many women, men, families, churches, and institutions have invested money, time, and multiple other resources into pursuing a lifelong career in ministry, yet a choice to completely walk away is often made. Better understanding the experiences of seminary graduates and how fit is constructed may help facilitate placing pastors in conditions and contexts where pastoral ministry can thrive.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review begins with an explanation of the attrition problem. Following the nature of the problem, the sections include: background of the ministry profession, the nature of attrition in related professions, study of ministry attrition, theoretical assumption related to organizational and perceived fit, and revisiting the research question.

The Nature of the Problem

Attrition within the professions is a significant problem in multiple fields. However, in ministry it is more severe than most, with an 85% attrition rate of seminary graduates during the first five years of their ministry (Hoge & Wenger, 2005). Related to the present study, Willcoxson and Leslie (2010) found a critical issue directly associated with long-term university retention: when a student made a clear choice of major and career, the clarity of those choices led to greater persistence and less attrition. It is related to the present study because those who enter ministry have to make a clear choice of major and career. The path to ministry is rigorous. Evidence of clarity includes minimum 7-year academic commitment to ministry preparation. In spite of the career clarity, an 85% attrition rate exists (Hoge & Wenger 2005). While clarity of major and career choice may increase persistence in higher education, a similar clarity does not support greater levels of persistence in ministry.

Earlier research posited that 50% of seminary graduates dropped out of the ministry within the first five years of beginning ministry (Meek et al., 2003; Oswald et al., 2003). Research from Duke University, however, found that 85% of individuals, who had successfully completed the rigorous seminary training for the ministry, permanently left the ministry within their first five years (Hoge & Wenger, 2005). A more recent study corroborated the findings (Spencer et al., 2012).

Background on the Ministry Profession

In order to situate the literature review within the context of attrition from ministry, it is important to get an idea of who graduates from Association of Theological Schools (ATS) seminaries and begins ministry. According to ATS (Aleshire & Graham, n.d.), based on exit surveys given to the 2015 class of 14,000 seminary graduates, 86% planned to work in a local church as a pastor, 6% planned a career in some form of institutional chaplaincy/hospice, 6% planned to work in a specialized ministry not connected to a local church, and 2% were undecided about their career plans.

Of the approximately 14,000 ATS graduate degrees conferred in 2014, over 9,000 were granted to males, and over 5,000 were granted to females. Over the last 10 years, there was an increase in the number of women and minorities and a decrease in the number of White men who attended and graduated from ATS seminaries. Today, more women and minorities than White men graduate from seminary and enter local church ministry (Aleshire & Graham, n.d.).

ATS reports new enrolling students are getting older. Earlier research reports a greater number of seminary students are enrolling to prepare for second careers (Hoge & Wenger, 2005). Older and second career students entering seminary represents a change to the tradition of going to seminary immediately following graduation from an undergraduate program. Additionally, ATS reports minorities and older students are graduating with higher levels of debt than other students.

There are in excess of 217 denominations in the United States (Lindner, 2012). Many local churches close each year. Additional new churches start each year making it hard to specify the exact number of religious congregations; however, some estimate 314,000 protestant churches (Lindner, 2012). Hoge and Wenger (2005) found seminary graduates were likely to

start with ministry assignments in rural, under-resourced churches. Several denominations are concerned with the attrition of clergy (Hoge & Wegner, 2005).

Overview of Seminary Preparation for the Ministry

A seminary degree is a professional, graduate degree. The degree prepares graduates to work as ministers. Some denominations require a seminary degree before a person can be ordained (Hoge & Wenger, 2005). Approximately 10,000 Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degrees, of the 14,000 ATS degrees conferred, are annually awarded. The M.Div. degree is the most common ATS degree and often includes more than 70 semester hours of credit. The M.Div. is geared toward preparing women and men to immediately serve as pastors in churches. When they graduated, they had prepared to become a pastor. They had completed a minimum of seven years, full-time, academic preparation.

In the context of this study, leaving ministry means leaving the ranks of practicing clergy with no intention to return to clergy status. The 85% ministry attrition statistic includes all ministers who leave any ministry role. Therefore, the 85% attrition rate also accounts for those ministers who left pastoral ministry for other non-church roles. It means 85% of those who were once considered ministers, having previously articulated a call to lifelong ministry and pursued advanced levels of academic preparation, are no longer considered ministers. Those who chose to leave the ministry did not choose to try a different ministry role. They were not moving from a local church pastoral role to a role outside of the local church such as a chaplain. They permanently left the clergy with no intention to return.

Nature of attrition: Related professional practices and impact of early experiences

Research within multiple professions established a worker's experiences during the early career years were formative and influential when making critical decisions about persisting or

departing a profession (Crow et al., 2005; DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Kwok, 2013; Liebenberg, 2011; Margolis, 2008). The research on teacher and nurse attrition establish that the early career years are vitally important at sustaining long-term careers (Crow & Hartman, 2005; DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Kwok, 2013).

Other professions: Attrition rates. Between 50% and 75% of beginning nurses (Crow et al., 2005), 64% of beginning mental health care workers (Kwok, 2013), 43% of beginning lawyers (McDonald, 1998), 50% to 60% of beginning student affairs professionals (Silver & Jakeman, 2014), and 50% of beginning teachers (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011) permanently depart their chosen careers during the first few years of beginning their respective careers. An examination of the attrition literature from some of these professions can be informative in helping to better understand the nature of the attrition phenomenon in the ministry. For example, considerable work on professional attrition has been done with teachers and nurses.

Attrition in the professions: Causes. Teachers are most likely to leave a teaching career during the critical first five years (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011). Kelly and Northrop (2015) noted teachers who left during their first five years self-reported burnout, career dissatisfaction, and perceived problems in their schools, or the general field of education, as causes that contributed to decisions about whether to leave or stay. During the early career phase, teachers report their highest levels of job dissatisfaction, the greatest occurrence of stress, emotional exhaustion, and eventual burnout (Clandinin et al., 2015; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Le Cornu, 2013; Long et al., 2012).

Teacher attrition research establishes a link between career satisfaction and higher salaries: higher salaries result in greater satisfaction and less burnout (Kelly, 2004; Kelly & Northrop, 2015). Existing research posits that career satisfaction and salary/economic benefits

contributed to both teacher and nurse departure decisions (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Kwok, 2013; Nooney, Unruh, & Yore, 2010; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Career satisfaction is a challenge in both teaching and nursing (Crow et al., 2005; Kelly & Northrop, 2015).

Research on nurse attrition concentrated on an "intent to leave" rather than on who actually left is common in nursing (Nooney et al., 2010). Crow et al. (2005) suggest a long-term nursing career lasts at least five years. Crow et al. (2005) noted nurses identified an intent to leave their career because of poor management and supervision. Furthermore, previous research discovered nurses persisted beyond five-years because of well-trained management and perceived support structures (Crow et al., 2005; Marom & Koslowsky, 2012; Nooney et al., 2010).

When there is a high rate of attrition in a profession, the constant turnover impacts the organizational culture and morale (Gallant & Riley, 2014). A perceived culture of support, or lack of support, in a school building or in a hospital, contributed to decisions to persist or leave teaching and nursing (Clandinin et al., 2015; DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Le Cornu, 2013; Marom & Koslowsky, 2012; Nooney et al., 2010).

New teachers who left their careers had encountered working conditions that were not conducive to career persistence (Gallant & Riley, 2014). New teachers described challenges that included poor student discipline, no administrative support, and a negative school culture. How new teachers resolved these challenges influenced new teacher departure and persistence decisions (Clandinin et al., 2015; Gallant & Riley, 2014).

New teacher attrition research frequently focuses on attrition as a one-time decision, rather than as a process occurring over time (Clandinin et al., 2015). There is not only a single challenge teachers identify that contributes to their departure or persistence decisions. Rather

when new teachers encountered multiple challenges without resolving the challenges in satisfying ways, it resulted in departure decisions. Where new teachers resolved challenges in satisfying ways, it contributed to persistence (Clandinin et al., 2015).

New teachers describe a negative school culture as a place where there exists a perpetual inability to resolve the unique challenges. New teachers often identify the school's culture as contributing factor in their perception of not fitting in or matching the school where they teach (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007; Le Cornu, 2013; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). Previous research implies that the challenges faced by new teachers influence departure and persistence decisions. These early career challenges influence how new teachers construct and understand their perceived fit to a specific location within a chosen career.

Attrition in the professions: Interventions. School policy makers, concerned about the high attrition rate of beginning teachers, responded by implementing and formalizing induction programs focused on new teachers. Induction programs were viewed as a "bridge" for new teachers making the transition from being a student of teaching to becoming a teacher of students (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Induction programs were different than traditional in-service programs or professional development programs. Induction programs were initially designed to address two beginning teacher issues that were previously identified as causative factors in attrition: burnout and career dissatisfaction (Kelly, 2004; Kelly & Northrop, 2015). Ingersoll and Smith (2004) found induction programs increased retention of teachers.

Another specific response to teacher attrition during the early career phase was the implementation of mentoring programs (Long et al., 2012; J. Rippon & Martin, 2006). Long et al. (2012) in their literature review on induction found that the terms "induction" and

"mentoring" were interchangeable and often synonymous. Kelly and Northrop (2015) found, however, that induction and mentoring programs have very little effect on retention when new teachers perceive a lack of support or perceive school problems. Bleeker et al. (2012) found that informal mentoring was more helpful to new teachers than assigning formal mentors to new teachers. Informal mentoring naturally happened in buildings where high morale and a culture of support existed (Bleeker at al, 2012).

Jones and Young (2008) suggested that increasing support for new teachers who taught in high-stress environments led to career persistence. Multiple teacher attrition studies posited that support for both new and experienced teachers was vital and contributed to teacher decisions to persist or leave during their first five years (Jones & Youngs, 2012; Kelly & Northrop, 2015; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

When new teachers perceived organizational support, there was higher persistence. When teachers perceived a lack of organizational support, there was attrition. The building principal was identified as the person vital to creating a perception of support or lack of support (Jones & Youngs, 2012). The presence or absence of emotional support influenced career decisions to depart or persist (Gallant & Riley, 2014).

Nurse persistence was likely when there was continuous, supportive communication with supervisors and colleagues. Supportive communication left nurses feeling valued and respected (Crow et al., 2005). The value and respect perceived by nurses contributed to their decision to persist. However, when supportive communication did not exist, those nurses perceived a lack of value and respect and were more likely to depart.

The presence of support continues to be associated, by new teachers and new nurses, with a perceived sense of belonging, matching, or fitting in with a chosen career (Clandinin

et al., 2015; Crow et al., 2005; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007). The perceived absence of support contributes to feeling like a misfit within a building and at a career level (Rippon & Martin, 2006).

Study of Ministry Attrition

Ministers who left reported high levels of career satisfaction (Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Stewart 2009). Neither career satisfaction nor salary were considered major motivations for those who left. However, as referenced earlier, ministry has traditionally been considered a very specific call to a lifetime vocation (Foster, 2006; Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Klaas & Klaas, 1999; Meek et al., 2003; Oswald et al., 2003; Stewart, 2009). Hoge and Wenger (2005) found many pastors left "viewed their ministry not as a calling but as a profession, and themselves as employees" (p. 157).

Neither gender or race have been considered primary motivations for pastors making decisions to leave ministry (Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Stewart, 2009). While gender is not considered a motivation for departing, there are several denominations which do not allow women to serve in ministry (Hoge & Wenger, 2005). While women were placed in ministry roles, those who left did not identify gender as a primary motivation for their departure (Hoge & Wenger, 2005).

There is speculation older, second career pastors may be less likely to endure congregational resistance toward innovation, lower starting salaries, and conflict (Tergesen, 2013). Resistance and lower salaries are common in first church assignments (Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Stewart, 2009). These second career pastors often left more lucrative careers to attend seminary. They began a second career with a much lower beginning salary (Tergesen, 2013). The combined level of debt and lack of salary one might think would point toward attrition.

However, again, earlier research posits salary and economic benefits were not primary motivations for pastors who made the decision to leave (Hoge & Wenger, 2005).

Stewart's (2009) research suggested learning interpersonal, conflict resolution skills were not part of the formal preparation for ministry but were expected professional skills. She noted that these skills were rarely learned. Inability to utilize those skills resulted in pastors leaving. However, Burns and Cervero (2002) posited that conflict resolution skills were best learned on the job not in a training program.

Attrition rates. Previous ministry attrition research focused on those who already left ministry. Earlier research sample groups were broadly defined as those who shared the common experience of permanently leaving the ministry. Previous studies did not explicitly focus on ministry departure related to a particular career phase. Previous study samples did not distinguish between the pastors at various career stages (Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Meek et al., 2003; Stewart, 2009).

Establishing a firm attrition rate over time is challenging (Parker & Martin, 2011). Meek et al. (2003) suggest 50% leave within first five years while an additional 75% considered permanently leaving (Parker & Martin, 2011) at least once. Hoge and Wenger (2005) found that 85% of seminary graduates permanently left within five years. Clergy permanently depart at a high rate and have done so for several years (Burns & Cervero, 2004; Jud, 1970; Mills & Koval, 1971).

Ministry attrition: Causes. Pastors who permanently left ministry identified feeling alone, having no one to talk to about their challenges, and alienation from colleagues as contributing factors in their decisions to leave (Burns & Cervero, 2004; Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Klaas & Klaas, 1999; Meek et al., 2003; Oswald et al., 2003; Stewart, 2009). Burns and Cervero

(2002), drawing on previous research, posit the first five years of pastoral ministry include nearly half of the highest stress moments of pastoral ministry. Stress causes teachers, nurses, and pastors to permanently depart (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Nooney et al., 2010; Stewart, 2009). Hoge and Wenger (2006) posit that conflict—with people in the church and with denominational officials—was motivated decisions to permanently depart ministry. The intensity of a conflict often resulted in higher levels of stress, which in turn contributed to burnout for many who left (Meek et al., 2003; Oswald et al., 2003).

Oswald (1980) identified several shared conceptual challenges pastors beginning their first assignments should expect to encounter. The first challenge is translating academic experiences into a pragmatic and effective pastoral practice. The second challenge is the presence of conflict which contrasts with an idealized expectation of ministry as conflict-free. The third challenge is the development of the interpersonal skills necessary to effectively work with people. Stewart (2009), nearly 30 years after Oswald, also posited pastors are not adequately resolving conflict and needed better training in interpersonal skills. Conflict resolution and interpersonal skills are recurrent themes and challenges faced by pastors (Burns & Cervero, 2004; Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Klaas & Klaas, 1999; Meek et al., 2003; Stewart, 2009).

Burns and Cervero (2004) focus their research on how pastors learn to deal with conflict. Pastors identify unresolved conflict as a primary motive to abandon their calling. For Burns and Cervero (2004) learning to resolve conflict is defined as learning the politics of ministry. They establish conflict is normal and should be expected. Their assumption, based on workplace learning theory, is pastors learn the politics of ministry on the job. However, they also note where pastors learn to effectively resolve conflict, it happened during the first five years of practice. The habits and patterns established in the earliest years of pastoral practice are

formative for long-term persistence (Burns & Cervero, 2004; Meek et al., 2003; Oswald et al., 2003).

A high percentage of pastors permanently leave the ministry. Those who left give a variety of reasons as to why. However, the most common motivations to depart can be grouped around issues related to unresolved conflict and the absence of support.

Theoretical Assumptions Underlying the Study of Attrition

Previous research on clergy attrition identified multiple motivations for permanently leaving ministry. These motivations included levels of conflict at congregational and denominational levels, burnout, stress, family issues, congregational dynamics, career dissatisfaction, improper placement, and feeling alone-alienation (Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Klaas & Klaas, 1999; Meek et al., 2003; Stewart, 2009). Teacher attrition research identified similar motivations to leave such as lack of support, career dissatisfaction, lack of positive building culture, lack of belonging, and burnout-stress (Clandinin et al., 2015; DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Jones & Youngs, 2012; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Nurse attrition research posited motivating factors such as a lack of well-trained supervision, burnout, stress, dissatisfaction, and lack of support (Crow et al., 2005; Kwok, 2013).

Earlier concepts. Burnout, stress (Cherniss, 1995), satisfaction, and salary (Kelly, 2004) were self-reported as factors by teachers who left during their first few years. Communication and management styles were identified as causes by nurses who left during their earliest years (Crow & Hartman, 2005). Additionally, the perception of support, or lack of support, was identified by both new teachers and beginning nurses as contributing factors in decisions to persist or leave.

Early attrition research focused on identifying problems inherent to workers who departed careers. Early research identified causes like stress, burnout, economic benefits, and satisfaction and how these personal causes motivated departure. More recent attrition research focused on how workers perceived the organization, how the organization provided support, and how organizations encouraged cultures where problems were resolved.

Attrition in higher, vocational, adult education: Theories and concepts. Similar concerns with regard to attrition are manifest in preparation programs in higher and adult education as well. Student attrition within traditional, non-traditional higher education programs (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 2012), vocational, and adult education programs (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Donkor, 2012; Lohman & Dingerson, 2005; Masdonati et al., 2010) have been research foci for many years. Roughly half of all undergraduate students do not persist to graduation (Bergman et al., 2014).

Attrition research related to higher education focuses on institutional or student characteristics (Tinto, 2012; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, 2000). Institutional characteristics, such as faculty involvement with students and first-year student orientations, have been two key facets of previous higher education attrition research. Student indicators related to attrition have included such characteristics as GPA and family background.

However, Tinto (2006) distinguished a transitional moment in attrition research. Initial attrition research focused on individual student attributes, which resulted in a "blame the student" approach. Attrition research shifted its focus and began accounting for how the organizational environment influenced student decisions to depart from school. The shift required researchers to understand "patterns of interaction" (p. 3) between students and organizational environments. Previous research on graduate students refers to these "patterns of

interaction" as a socialization process (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001) for a professional role. Experiencing socialization, students find that "identification with and commitment to professional roles are complex, continuous, and developmental" (p. 37). Understanding these interactive patterns in higher education required institutions to more sufficiently and intentionally address attrition problems.

Ministry attrition: Limitations of earlier studies. Research exploring the beginning career stage of pastoral ministry is necessary. Multiple clergy-based studies identified the earliest career years as formative years that could lead to a persistent and thriving ministry practice. Burns and Cervero (2004) suggest a minister's first five years are the career stage where the long-term habits necessary for persistence are developed and practiced. While the first years of pastoral ministry are recognized as formative, no research exploring pastoral experiences during the at-risk career stage exists.

A descriptive understanding of early-ministry challenges may yield rich insights into the nature of pastoral ministry and may provide an understanding of why so many early career pastors leave while so few remain. Previous research focused on those who left and their self-reported motivations for leaving. However, there is no research which explored the experiences of those who persist and how they described their ministry. Their voices are missing. Exploring ministry experiences, through the construct of perceived fit, will contribute and build upon existing research on organizational fit, attrition from the professions, and, particularly, to ministry training and development.

Perceived Fit: An Emerging Theoretical Perspective

One potentially promising concept in the study of ministry attrition is the notion of perceived fit. The notion of Fit is implied in clergy attrition research but never fully explored.

Organizational fit research posits the "fit" between a person and her/his organizational environment influences job/role satisfaction, motivation, performance, and long-term commitment to an organization or profession (Judge et al., 2002). Therefore, if previous organizational fit research is accurate about the positive influence of right fit on long-term commitment to a career and an organization, then, looking at ministry experiences through the lens of perceived fit may yield rich insights.

Organizational Fit: A Brief Overview

Behavior, in particular decision-making, is the function of how a person interacts with an environment (Lewin, 1935). The ways the person interacts with the environment shape behavior. The interactive process is called the theory of interactional psychology.

In a study of why some workers decided on careers within specific organizations and then later left those same organizations, Schneider (1987) posited individuals were more likely to be attracted to, selected by, perform better in, and remain in organizations which were compatible with their personal characteristics. The interactive process of determining compatibility is called the theory of person-organization fit (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013) and is one of the most common theories in organizational and industrial psychology. The theory of person-organization fit is often used to explain why workers identify with a specific organization (Anaza, 2015) or are attracted to particular organizations (Carless, 2005). High levels of organizational fit happen across cultures and lead to positive outcomes, confirming the salience of the fit phenomena (Oh et al., 2014).

An interesting aspect within organizational fit research is the finding when person-organization fit exists at work, the spillover effects include positive home interactions (Merecz & Andysz, 2014). The connection between fit and home interactions is important. One of the key

motivations for leaving ministry was how ministry negatively impacted home interactions (Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Meek et al., 2003; Stewart, 2009).

Organizational Fit: Two Paradigms

Organizational fit research follows two paradigmatic approaches. First, firmly rooted in interactional psychology, is the belief that organizational fit is based on the measurable interaction between specific personal and organizational characteristics. It is primarily positivist in approach. Second is the notion of perceived fit as a psychological construct primarily in the mind that influences behavior. It is primarily constructivist in approach.

Positivist paradigm. Organizational fit is determined by measuring the correspondence, match, or similarity between the person and environment or organization. Research in this paradigm, for instance, measures a person's values and separately measures an organization's values (Cable & Judge, 1996; Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). Often these measurements are derived from separate sources: a worker reports her/his values while another source reports an organization's values. When a degree of correspondence, match, or similarity exists, it is considered an organizational fit. One premise of the approach is an employee decides to persist based on interaction between the areas where there is a higher degree of match, similarity, or correspondence. A second premise of the approach is an employee decides to depart based on the interaction between areas where there is a lower degree of match, similarity, or correspondence. This positivist approach to fit predicts several positive outcomes where person-organization fit exists: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, personal well-being, and work production (Anaza, 2015; Cable & Judge, 1996; Carless, 2005; Merecz & Andysz, 2014; Oh et al., 2014).

Schneider (1987) suggests fit includes a process of attraction, selection, and attrition. A worker is attracted to an organization because of similar goals. The attraction of the worker

toward the shared goals of an organization is called a fit between a person and organization. An organization selects the worker because the organization values the workers' shared goals. The worker is called a fit. These attraction and selection behaviors are shaped by positive interactions between the person and the environment.

Organizational fit research within this paradigm sorts is sorted into two categories: supplemental fit and complementary fit. Supplemental fit is the idea that the worker supplements the characteristics of the organization. In Schneider's language (1987), a worker is attracted or selected based on their similarity to the organization; the worker is a supplemental fit. Complementary fit is the idea that the worker complements an area of need or weakness within the organization. The organization needs the worker to have a specific skill set. When the worker's skill set matches their need, this is called a complementary fit.

Attrition from an organization happens when the person selected begins to experience a sense of misfit. The misfits leave. When a misfit leaves, the attraction and selection process begins again. Over time, because misfits leave, the workers in an organization become more similar, less adaptable to change, and resistant to keeping people who do not fit (Schneider, 1987).

Constructivist paradigm. The second paradigm is primarily a constructivist approach. The constructivist approach is used less often in the overall organizational fit research, but addresses a gap in the overall research on organizational fit (Billsberry et al., 2005, 2010; Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). The second paradigm is called perceived fit. Perceived fit is a psychological construct primarily in the mind that influences behavior. Missing from the first paradigm, and leading to much of the definitional debate surrounding organizational fit discussed in chapter one, is an understanding of how a person's perception of fit is formed and influences

behavior (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). Earlier research on fit relied on a person's self-reported designation that he/she perceived a fit within an organization (Cable & Judge, 1996) and assumed all workers operated with the same meaning of fit. However, there is a paucity of research on what a person means by fit/misfit, how a person's perception of fit/misfit forms and changes, and the ways in which a person's perceived fit influences behavior.

Perceived Fit in the Professions

Gallant and Riley (2014) suggested that teachers departed in part because their expectations of a teaching career and the actual reality of what happened in a specific building were different. The culture in the building created a perception of not fitting in with both their career choice and their particular organization. The primary missing feature researchers identified in an organizational culture was the absence of emotional support when faced with unexpected challenges. Le Cornu (2013) posited the misfit between a teacher's expectations and the realities of the teaching career caused departure decisions. Teachers left when they perceived a misfit. Another study posited where fit existed between a new teacher's expectations and experiences, that perceived fit influenced their career decisions (Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). When teachers experienced a lack of support in addressing the misfit between their expectations and realities, they were at-risk of permanent departure (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007).

Crow (2005) posits to properly address nurse attrition there is a need to fit the nursing tasks to the personal needs and characteristics of the at-risk nurse. Crow suggests right fit between a nurse and an environment may create a culture of retention.

Construct of Perceived Fit Applied to the Ministry

Klaas and Klaas (1999) suggested pastor and congregation mismatches contribute to ministry attrition. Stewart (2009) posited that some churches were too dysfunctional to be

pastored well. Pastors mismatched to these churches were at-risk of permanently departing.

Meek (2003) suggested when pastors worked in organizational cultures that led to alienation and

feeling alone, they experienced increased stress levels. The increase in stress resulted in pastors

making decisions to permanently depart. Their research found pastors needed support; pastors

also found it hard to find support. Hoge and Wenger (2005), followed by Stewart (2009), posited

the presence of conflict motivated pastors' decisions to permanently depart. Burns and Cervero

(2004) posited pastors learned how to resolve conflict during their first five years. Furthermore,

in looking at how pastors learned to deal with conflict, their sample of pastors identified the

support from experienced pastors, that they received early in ministry, as a necessary component

to successful ministry, particularly in dealing with challenges.

There is an intuitive sense that fit matters and influences employee decisions. Yet very

little is known about how perceived fit is constructed (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013).

Meanwhile organizational fit research continues to find when and where organizational fit exists,

positive outcomes exist. Positive outcomes include the characteristics of career satisfaction,

better conflict resolution, a long-term organizational commitment, levels of organizational

support, better home-life interactions, and positive organizational morale (Anaza, 2015; Kristof-

Brown & Billsberry, 2013, 2013; Merecz & Andysz, 2014; Oh et al., 2014; Schneider, 1987).

Perceived Fit: The Perspective of Seminary Graduates

The connections between organizational fit and long-term career commitment, job

satisfaction, and support warrant exploring seminary graduates' experiences of ministry through

the construct of perceived fit. First, there is a gap in organizational fit research. Very little

research describes how perceived fit is constructed. Second, there is a gap in ministry attrition

studies. There is no research that explores seminary graduates' experiences during their early career when 85% make the decision to permanently depart ministry.

Building upon research from other professions also experiencing high early-career attrition rates, perceptions of support and the ways new challenges are negotiated are two experiences worthy of exploration. Studying their experiences should yield rich insights into how seminary graduates describe the at-risk years of ministry and construct their notion of fit.

The perception of support, across the spectrum of research on professional attrition, remains a recurring theme. The levels of perceived support influenced decisions to depart or persist. The theme of support is usually connected to facing unexpected challenges associated with starting a new career. Furthermore, the descriptive language of fit, misfit, match, or belonging is used to describe why teachers, nurses, and pastors left.

Knowing more about the kinds and types of experiences that happen during the first five years may help those entrusted with the placement of pastors to facilitate better matches between a pastor and a congregation. Additionally, a better understanding the first five years may help those responsible for providing professional development opportunities offer appropriate learning experiences focused on the needs of beginning pastors. Finally, descriptions of pastoral ministry are needed so those entrusted with introducing appropriate interventions can explicitly address attrition and persistence.

However, more than studying the accumulation of experiences from the first five years, it is important to distinguish which kinds of experiences to study. Therefore, based on research from other professions with high attrition rates, there needs to be a focused study at how these pastors experience ministry through the notion of perceived fit.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Purpose, Goal, and Research Question

The research purpose was to better understand the experiences of seminary graduates during their first five years of ministry by looking at their ministry experiences through the construct of perceived fit/misfit. The research explored how seminary graduates described their early career experiences. I wanted to describe the types of ministry challenges seminary graduates faced during their first five years, understand the perceived levels of support they received while facing challenges, and how those challenges were resolved. Additionally, the interpretative nature of qualitative research allowed me to describe the nature of interaction between the seminary graduate and her/his organization. Finally, employing a qualitative approach allowed me to discover an answer to the following research question: How do life experiences contribute to the ways seminary graduates think about ministry?

Research Design

Perceived fit/misfit is a psychological construct located primarily in the mind that influences behavior (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). Perceived fit is not observable as an external reality. I approached the research using the perceived fit and misfit as experiences. Discovering how seminary graduates perceived fit/misfit required a qualitative approach. Furthermore, the qualitative approach was informed by phenomenological methods. Qualitative research attempts to explore, understand, and interpret the meanings of its participants. Previous clergy studies suggested future research should include the study of the early career years (Burns & Cervero, 2004). Organizational fit research suggested the need to explore how the notion of perceived fit was constructed (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). Employing a qualitative

approach aligned with the research goals: Exploring, understanding, and interpreting career experiences of seminary graduates by using the notion of perceived fit/misfit.

Methodological approach. I employed a qualitative approach, which allowed me to provide a description, an interpretation, and analysis of early career experiences of seminary graduates. The study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 purposefully selected participants. Purposefully choosing 17 participants to interview is suggested as an appropriate sample size to explore and understand a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Seventeen participants provided rich information to aid the descriptions (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, purposefully selecting participants, nine persisters and eight non-persisters, provided variation around both the decision to leave or the decision to stay in ministry. In order to describe, interpret, and analyze the career experiences of ministers, it was important to hear stories from participants who navigated through the first five years and from those who left during their first five years.

Context and setting. I interviewed graduates from a single Midwestern seminary. My research is considered "backyard" because of my affiliation with a particular denomination (Glesne, 2011). However, the selected seminary, endorsed by multiple denominations, provides theological education to students pursuing ministry work. The seminary is the only seminary the denomination has so their graduates were the focus the study.

The seminary is a multi-site facility, with locations in four states and Costa Rica. The seminary is fully accredited by ATS and has held accreditation since 1970. According to ATS (2017), over 260 students were enrolled in the fall of 2015. The seminary offers four master degrees and one professional doctorate. The primary degree is the Master of Divinity (M.Div.). The M.Div. requires 76 semester credit hours. Their three Master of Arts degrees require

between 45 and 51 semester credit hours. Doctor of Ministry graduates will not be a part of the study.

Seminaries offer master degree programs designed to prepare graduates to serve in a variety of ministry contexts. Some will serve as what are called lead pastors. Lead pastors are responsible for the total ministry of a local church. Other graduates will serve as what are called staff pastors. Staff pastors serve within particular local congregations under the direction of a lead pastor. Staff pastors generally work with specific responsibilities for an area of ministry in the local church. For instance, a staff ministry may have responsibility for education, children, youth, or music. Other graduates may pursue further graduate education, serve as chaplains, work as licensed counselors, or serve in a myriad of other ministry roles.

However, graduation does not guarantee a job, and graduates of the seminary are not automatically placed in a ministry role. The graduates are responsible to find their own placement. Therefore, the possibility existed: some graduates never start ministry. The possibility also existed some graduates would find assignments in other denominations.

Participants and selection. According to the selected seminary's public graduation lists, the classes of 2011, 2010, and 2009 represented 167 graduates. Graduates from classes placed participants within a five to seven-year time in ministry since graduation at the time of their interview. The class of 2011 had 68 graduates; the class of 2010 had 46 graduates; and the class of 2009 had 53 graduates.

The published graduation lists also told where the graduate went to work, if a church assignment existed prior to graduation. The initial work assignment enabled me to find those who persisted beyond five years.

The initial assignment is public record and easily accessible via the internet. Using their initial assignment, I accessed a separate public record, called a District Journal. District journals were accessed online. Utilizing journals, I referenced the initial ministry assignment listed on the public graduation list. For instance, Jane Green graduated in 2011 and her first assignment was at the Lansing (MI) Church. I looked at the 2016 (MI) District Journal for the listed church in 2011. In the Journal I would find whether Jane was still there. If she was listed, she met the requirements of being in ministry for five years. If she was not in her initial assignment, I searched earlier public journals to discover whether Jane transferred to another ministry assignment or completely left the ministry. District Journals were easily accessible to anyone and available on multiple websites.

My intention was to choose 18 participants. However, I only found 8 non-persisters who were willing to participate in the study. Five non-persisters who were unwilling to participate. Three refused, one initially agreed and later declined, and one never responded to my request. I found two additional persons who I thought met the requirements for participation, but after beginning the interview realized they did not meet the parameters of the study. Therefore, I chose graduates from the following classes—2011, 2010, and 2009. I chose six graduates from the classes of 2011 and 2009 and five graduates from the class of 2010 for a total of 17 participants. Of the six selected from the classes of 2009 and 2011, 50% of them will have persisted at least five years and 50% of them will have started in ministry but left ministry within a five-year time frame. For the class of 2010, three of them persisted at least five years and 2 of them left ministry. I ended up with nine graduates who persisted and eight graduates who did not persist.

I began by identifying graduates who had initial assignments within 200 miles of my location. After participants were identified, I contacted potential participants, explained my research, and scheduled an interview. If the participants were within 200 miles of my location, the interview was conducted face-to-face. However, because of cost constraints, if the participant was beyond 200 miles, I conducted a video-based interview, which aligns with established qualitative interview techniques (Patton, 2015; Merriam, & Tisdell, 2014; Salmons, 2013). I ended up conducting three face-to-face interviews and 14 video-based interviews.

Data Collection

As required, I submitted an application to the institutional review board. The application consisted of an overview of the study, a copy of the consent form (Appendix B), and the interview protocol (Appendix C). I was granted exempt status to conduct research for my study. I contacted the purposefully selected participants. I explained the research study, my role as both researcher and minister, and informed consent. If a person was interested in participating, they signed the informed consent form. After the consent form was signed and received an interview was scheduled and conducted.

Data collection instrument. Each in-depth interview followed a semi-structured protocol. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. I pilot tested the interview protocol with two ministers.

Data collection procedures. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. I paid a company to transcribe the recordings. Audio files will be destroyed after the completion of the research study. Transcripts were stored digitally and password-protected and will be kept for five years. Each participant was allowed to choose a pseudonym. A digital file listing the cross-references between participants and pseudonyms was stored separately and also was password-

protected. My preference was to conduct the interviews person-to-person, but I realized the cost of conducting 17 interviews of seminary graduates spread geographically around North America was prohibitive. Once I determined cost prohibited conducting face-to-face interviews, I conduct fourteen interviews via video and recorded the audio for transcription.

Trustworthiness of the data.

To ensure qualitative trustworthiness, the findings were checked for consistency. I employed three strategies.

Strategy 1. I will present a longitudinal description. The stories will illuminate how the participants constructed and understood their perceived fit/misfit. Presenting the life experiences of seminary graduates who both left and persisted should provide an informative narrative of what happens during the early ministry career years.

Strategy 2. I consistently clarified my researcher biases. I have to remain open to what participants share. I let their stories change my preconceptions about what happened or what should have happened during their first five years. I also acknowledge where my own biases may enter into the interpretation. Using a qualitative approach, I recognize I will be active in constructing an interpretation of the stories and analyzing the findings.

Strategy 3. I used peer debriefing to triangulate my interpretations and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. I provided the findings to my peers and utilized their expertise as a way to check, clarify, and challenge my interpretations. I utilized peer debriefing in an ongoing manner. The peers I selected were ministers.

Data Analysis

The collected data allowed constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2014) of early-career experiences, perceptions of support, kinds of challenges faced and navigated, and the

nature of interaction between the seminary graduate and her/his organizational context. Data analysis was ongoing during the interviews. First, I compared the interview transcripts to the audio. Second, I kept notes recording my thoughts, questions, and experiences of what was happening while I conducted the interviews. Third, while immersed in the data, I kept a separate file noting what I consider compelling and striking observations from the interview transcripts. Fourth, while reading the transcripts, I used Dedoose to initially code each transcript. The codes emerged from the data. I employed the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014) for coding and analyzing the data. Fifth, using the emerging codes, I identified the categories and interpreted the themes from the data.

Representation of Data and Findings

In line with the qualitative methods employed, the data and findings are represented by a longitudinal description of the life experiences of seminary graduates. Furthermore, the emerging themes and multiple perspectives of the participants are described. Descriptions of participant settings and utilization of participant quotes are used to support the emerging themes.

Limitations

First, the study is limited to ministers in, or formerly in, a particular denomination. I chose a denomination with which I was most familiar. The rationale for using one denomination is each participant ministered during their first five years in a church that functioned with the same policies/bylaws. Bylaws explain how a pastor is placed in a particular congregation. Bylaws additionally explain roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority between pastor and congregation.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher I was the primary research instrument. I interacted with participants with whom I share a common experience of seminary training. I have pastored. However, I am also well beyond the five-year career mark. The participants and I shared a common experience of graduating from seminary and entering ministry. While the participants and I shared seminary graduation in common, the kinds and types of ministry experiences were different. I wanted to hear and describe their early-career experiences in their words.

I am a member of the clergy and have been for nearly 30 years. I graduated from two different seminary programs and earned a Master of Religious Education and a Doctor of Ministry. My master's program helped me enter ministry; the doctoral program helped me persist. I served in a variety of pastoral roles. Following seminary graduation, I could not find an initial ministry assignment. I waited for two years before finding my first assignment.

During my first five years of ministry I considered leaving pastoral ministry. I recognize my first five years ended more than two decades ago. Both the good and bad memories have been tempered by time. As the primary research instrument, I recognize leaving or persisting in ministry is a contextualized and personal decision. My researcher role explored how seminary graduates experienced ministry. I will describe ministry experiences of those who persisted and of those who did not persist. The meanings constructed from the latter experiences will be different from how I experienced the early career years.

I work now in denominational administration rather than in a local church. I help with the placement of pastors in assignments. I help train new pastors. The research on clergy attrition and persistence is important for my career. It will benefit those who work with pastoral training and placement. It will benefit future pastors and their transition from school to ministry.

As the primary research instrument, I am embedded in the participants' lives. I am responsible to accurately interpret the participant's stories. A reader must be able to trust that I take every necessary precaution to conduct research in an ethical manner. If there are ethical issues, and those issues are not explicitly addressed, then the whole project may be questioned.

In summary, my qualitative study explored the experiences of seventeen seminary graduates. Seventeen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seminary graduates were conducted. The transcripts were transcribed and coded. The data was analyzed. Their stories are shared in chapter four.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to explore the life experiences of seminary graduates through the construct of perceived fit. The goal was a description of seminary graduates' life experiences and how they understand their notions of fit. The following question guided the study: How do life experiences contribute to the ways seminary graduates think about ministry? I conducted 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviews included nine graduates who persisted in ministry and eight graduates who left ministry.

Seventeen participant voices provide an in-depth, longitudinal description of an at-risk career phase. I refer to this phase in their career as an at-risk phase for two reasons. First, it is these the earliest years' experience where the profession experiences high levels of attrition. Second, the earliest years are critical years for developing habits necessary for long-term, sustainable ministry. Their voices narrate the journey. Each voice tells a compelling story. Participants reflected on their unique personal journey into ministry, and, for some, eventually out of ministry. They share heartaches, challenges, fears, frustrations, and hopes. They reflect on their successes and failures. Their stories give a glimpse into the ways decisions about entering, and in some cases leaving, ministry were made. They share how they prepared to be a minister. They talk about what happened during their preparation. They share their stories about what it is like to be a minister today. They share why some persisted and why others left.

The findings are organized around two broad periods in the participants' lives. Each of the broad periods includes themes that emerged from the analysis. First, the narrative provides a description of the early and formative experiences of church and ministry with the following themes: influences, school-age experiences, and college-related experiences. The second part describes their seminary and post-seminary experiences with the following themes: laboratory,

mentoring, faculty relationships, support, barriers, perceived fit, learning from others, transitions,

self-care strategies, and reassessing the call. Table 1 describes the 17 participants.

Name	College-Type	Field of Undergraduate Study	Age	Parent Activity Level in Local Church	Persist or Non-Persist
Ana	Denominational	Ministry	Early 30s	Grandparent=pastor	Persist
Barnabas	Denominational	Ministry	Early 30s	Parents=leaders	Persist
Bill	Denominational	Ministry	Early 30s	Parent=pastor	Persist
Catherine	Different country	Medical	Late 30s	Parents=leaders	Non-Persist
Charles	Private, liberal art, Christian	Ministry	Early 50s	Uninvolved; divorced	Non-Persist
Daniel	Flagship State	Medicine	Early 30s	Parent=pastor	Persist
David	Denominational	Ministry	Early 30s	Parent=pastor	Persist
Frank	Denominational	Ministry	Early 30s	Parent=pastor	Non-Persist
Ken	Denominational	History	Early 30s	Parent=pastor	Persist
Mary	Denominational	English/Ministry	Early 30s	Parents=leaders	Non-Persist
Nathaniel	Denominational	Accounting	Late 30s	Grandparent=pastor	Persist
Otto	Private, liberal art, Christian	Ministry	Early 30s	Uninvolved, divorced	Non-Persist
Pepper	Denominational	Mathematics	Early 30s	Parents=leaders	Non-Persist
Phineas	Denominational	Ministry	Early 30s	Parents=leaders	Persist
Ron	Denominational	Ministry	Late 30s	Parents=leaders	Persist
Teresa	Denominational	Education	Early 30s	Parent=pastor	Non-Persist
Westley	Denominational	Ministry	Early 30s	Parent=pastor	Non-Persist

Table 1: Participant Descriptive Summaries

Early and Formative Experiences of Church and Ministry

Sensing a call to ministry began at an early age and early life experiences shaped vocational decisions. The time frame covers childhood through college graduation. To better understand this narrative within the lives of the participants in this study, I first provide a brief demographic description of the participants (Appendix x includes a fuller description of each participant).

Demographic summary. Of the seventeen participants (See Table 1 for more information), four were women. All participants were married. They ranged age. One was in his early 50s. Three were in their late 30s. Thirteen were in their early 30s. One participant was South American. Sixteen participants were White. All seventeen participants were married.

Three of the four women left ministry. Of the thirteen male participants, five of them decided to leave ministry. All seventeen served in the same denomination. Nine participants had at least one pastor-parent or pastor-grandparent who was an ordained minister. One of the nine had a pastor-parent who permanently left ministry. Two of the nine had both a pastor-parent and pastor-grandparent who were ordained ministers. Six participants had parents who, while not ministers, were involved in local church leadership.

While each of the participants graduated from college, thirteen participants graduated from the eight denominational campuses in the United States. Each of the thirteen were raised in the same denomination as their college affiliation. Two participants were graduates of non-religious universities. Two were graduates of private, Christian liberal arts institutions outside the denomination in which they would eventually serve. Eleven participants earned undergraduate degrees in a ministry related field. Fourteen participants went directly to seminary following completion of their undergraduate degree. Two felt called into ministry after

graduating from college. One took a year off after college graduation to serve as a volunteer in an international setting. Sixteen participants were raised in North America. One was raised in South America.

The description of early and formative experiences includes: Family and early childhood influences during a time when participants began to sense a call into ministry; school-age experiences; and college related experiences where participants navigated and clarified a sense of calling.

Influences. Participants recalled experiences within their family and their childhood that may have shaped their interest in ministry. For example, Nathaniel remembered the impact of his grandfathers, "My one grandpa gave me bibles for Christmas. My other grandpa gave me ball gloves." Mary reflected on a significant moment when she was twelve years old, "I had a seizure at school. They discovered a brain tumor, and I had surgery a month later…I felt after that I specifically wanted to help people know more about God." Powerful moments impacted participants in profound ways. Charles remembered sensing his call early in life, "I don't know if I'd call it a vision, but just an image in my mind of me teaching a small group of people out of the Bible. I was 16…it something that hung with me."

Participants experienced the front lines of church life early. "Faith was foundational in our home…it was very shaping and formational," Phineas remembered. The experiences involved parents and, in some cases, grandparents. Otto, whose parents divorced when he was young, remembered, "When I was a younger kid, my grandma, I don't want to say 'strong armed,' but she would find ways to get me to go to church…I started to get involved there."

From early ages, participants were involved in local churches. Phineas recalled, "No matter what…they made sure that we attended mass on Sunday…we were regulars…at mass, we

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had a pew that was basically the (family name) pew." Ron remembered the early years as "formative years of my life." Attending multiple times per week, Bill recalled, "My friends from school thought we were in a cult, because we went to church three times a week. Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night. They just couldn't believe that we went to church so much." Not everyone attended church three times a week, though Barnabas recalled, "We went to church every Sunday." Each participant practiced regular church attendance. Catherine remembered her childhood as "being a good upbringing" where:

> My parents definitely raised me with intention…as I get older, I realize more and more that my parents were very intentional about everything they did when they raised me…I was definitely involved in the church and in ministry from as young as I can remember.

Parents were actively involved in church, Nathaniel noted that his dad, a school superintendent, "Played the piano and served in many capacities." Regular attendance at weekly services, plus they attended additional times and meetings because parents served on church boards, prepared to teach church classes, got music ready for Sunday services, or when parents were doing whatever was necessary at the church.

Ron remembered "very distinctly" going to high church services at the Russian Orthodox church. After his parents visited and decided to attend a denominational church, Ron recalled, "The priest who had married them (parents), as well as had baptized myself and my sisters…basically excommunicated us from that local parish." Ron continued to share how he became part of a denominational church during the "formative years of my life and faith development" where he observed a "camp meeting style, altar call framework of what church was all about…ingrained in my mind are camp meeting services, where people were in the aisles, waving hankies, and raising their hands." Ana remembered, "My parents were both very

involved in church…we were always at church, helping out, and participating in whatever was going on."

In multiple situations, a parent or grandparent served as a pastor. Ken talked about there being "no separation between the church and regular life…everybody in town knew who we were." After those experiences, Ken stated he had "no intention of being a pastor." Ken reflected on that time, "It's only now that I have a child that I realize…how big a part of my life it is…I'm intentionally trying to figure out things I took for granted as a kid." Ken pastors a non-traditional church where "nothing shaped up the way that I thought, but it's been a great process of God's guiding and teaching and learning. I feel like everything's been right, but it wasn't anything I expected." Daniel remembered parents who intentionally "shielded us from a lot of, I guess, the more difficult parts of ministry."

Participants began to glimpse an early picture of what ministry might be like. David noted,

As a pastor's kid, you see both the beautiful and the ugly of the church experience…
There's a struggle…with church and…the brokenness of people…also the beautiful side
of church…the generosity and love and support that comes with it, so we saw all of it.

However, not all participants experienced early positive church experiences. Frank talked about a formative moment where his father had a bad experience,

Where the church basically chewed him up and spit him out and kicked him out of the
church. He had a rough experience with that, so he was introduced to some other means
of work instead of being in ministry.

After Frank's dad was forced out of ministry, the family "moved around because of his different job." Frank decided to leave the ministry because of lack of opportunity; however, he never

searched for a ministry role beyond the church he attended because he did not want to move, "I didn't feel like I needed to find somewhere else." Bill remembered, "People act in unholy ways…or can be very unloving while still paying lip service" when his dad "was killed in a car accident…it was a fairly sudden thing…that all happened on a Thursday." Bill described the unholy and unloving ways related to a church service on the morning of the funeral:

> The whole service was pretty much just people giving testimonies about dad, and what he meant to them. Some of those testimonies were by kids who were maybe older...At that point most had graduated, and they'd come back to church that week…to tell stories about how much my dad had meant to them. The fact that some of those kids, where the parents thought my dad hadn't been doing enough for their kid, I think was just—well, I think my mom saw it as somewhat vindicating…You didn't always treat my husband very well, but look, he meant a lot to your son or daughter.

Having parents actively involved in churches provided opportunities to see different ways in which ministry happened or should happen. Frank remembered, "I was on the church board for a few years in high school" where he was given a glimpse into leadership aspects of a local church. Pepper recalled:

> It felt like a lot of times they (parents) were on staff, even though they were just committed lay people…dad was leading music from the stage for most of my childhood…we were shown by my parents the importance of being committed to the church, and we took that on ourselves.

With one exception, each participant pursued licensing and service in the same denomination as her/his family. Parents were often graduates of one of the denomination's

colleges. When deciding to attend college, and simultaneously talking about sensing a call into ministry, Barnabas talked about parental influence:

> They did not discourage me, but especially my dad was very much, listen, be sure you think this through very carefully…because if you go and get a degree in ministry, then there's only one string in your guitar…if you decide later there's something else you want to do…and you don't want to spend your life in ministry, then you have very few options.

Pepper reflected on his parents and grandparents, who had all been part of one denomination:

> I was always committed to the church and only knew that church and everything about it so when I went to college I went to the (denominational) college where I got my degree in math, but I felt called to ministry…I was also taking religion classes.

The parental influence impacted choosing a college major. Nathaniel remembered the influence, "I went to college knowing I was going to go to seminary. Then during college, my mom…my grandfather…said, 'why don't you do something other than religion if you're gonna go to seminary?' so I ended up doing accounting" because "I became very convicted of the idea that I should have a kind of tentmaking skill." Tentmaking is defined as an ability to earn money without relying on a church salary. He used accounting skills to pay for seminary and to support his family while pastoring. He is the only participant who still pastors his first church.

Charles described a very different family experience than the other participants, "Mom was a single parent…worked in downtown…so a lot of times we were latchkey kids." Through grade school the family attended church until "something happened in the…(church) class…mom just said, 'We're not going back'…basketball and football and baseball took over

our weekends." However, Charles, at age sixteen started attending church again, though not for spiritual reasons, he went "primarily because of a young lady who was part of the youth group."

Family and early childhood experiences influenced a sense of call. Active involvement at church gave opportunities for participants to glimpse church life from an early age. Parents and grandparents influenced the ways participants began thinking about God, church, and ministry. Parents, grandparents, and church affiliation influenced choices about where and how the participants would eventually pursue their ministry preparation.

School-age experiences. Experiences during the elementary, middle, or high school ages helped shape a sense of call to ministry. Phineas remembered, "I kind of first grabbed on to my faith for my own during high school. I just kind of launched myself into the scriptures every chance I could get." Ron noted, "Going into senior year of high school, God really began to just speak to me in significant ways." For some during the school years a willingness to pursue a ministry calling emerged. David recalled, "I was 15 or 16. I just remember that experience of giving God everything and being open to whatever He would call in the future… It was unfolding…feeling called to ministry." Phineas shared:

> I felt a sense of kind of God's leading, even early in my life. I wondered if that meant becoming a priest. I was an altar boy in the catholic church. I just always had a profound sense of God's leading in my life. It materialized more I guess I became more concrete in high school.

Ana recalled that she felt a call to ministry around middle school:

> Conversations at school start a lot more seriously, "What are you gonna' do after school?" They try and make you start picking a path in life. So I think that I was just more aware of that idea and thinking about that idea, but it was also a time where I was

growing a lot spiritually and really in those first stages of making my faith my own and not just seeing it as something that I did with my family, but what did it mean for me. For me, I just remember one night, just praying and thinking about it and just really feeling like—not the audible voice or anything like that, but the inner voice saying, "Would you serve me? Would you give your life to ministry and service for me?" For me, that was what that call looked like and felt like. Not an audible voice, but very much a strong sense of being asked to do this, to pursue this path.

Sometimes a sense of call happened in the context of faith development. Nathaniel noted:

My faith became personal during my teenage years. I experienced several deaths early on. My pastor's son died when I was 12. I had a couple of classmates die when I was in high school. Two coaches died, so that was sort of the gateway in many ways for me to really be introspective about what faith means…That's really where my calling began.

The school years offered specific opportunities to develop leadership skills that would later become useful in ministry. During the high school years, school teachers, pastors, or church leaders recognized leadership abilities. Otto, an "introverted wallflower," referenced " a teacher who encouraged me" after a "significant" transfer from a large public high school to a much smaller private, Christian high school where, "It opened a lot of doors, gave me a lot of opportunities…for student leadership, and speaking during some chapels… just ways to kind of engage."

Phineas remembered how a "pastor took an interest in me and would take me along on hospital visits. It was during that time that I really began to sense a call." Other church leaders, both ministers and non-ministers, affirmed a call to ministry. Church leaders entrusted the participants, while the participants were young, with opportunities to serve in the church. Otto

reflected on an interaction, "Our youth pastor just took some time. I think she…recognized something in me as far as, maybe, potential leadership, or something like that…shortly thereafter, I think, the following September, I sensed a calling to ministry." Key pastoral influences helped shape their sense of call. David recalled, "My youth pastor…confirmed… leadership potential and what he thought were gifts and graces for ministry."

I think it is important to note, given the number of participants whose dad/mom/grandparent was a pastor, the participants talked about non-family member pastors who affirmed them. Their pastoral influence is different than the parental/pastoral influence. Those who had parent-pastors often expressed no desire to be in ministry. David, whose dad pastored, recalled, "I knew I did not want to be a pastor for a long time." Key pastors, beyond the parent-pastor, affirmed and recognized leadership abilities.

As teenagers, the participants were involved in leading various ministries at their local church and beyond their local church in larger jurisdictional settings. Bill was elected to serve on "district committees" but was forced to resign because "I started to live one life where I was one person when I was at school, and then I was a very different person if I was at home or at church…those two worlds collided." They served on church committees. They preached when opportunities came. When they talked with other church leaders to clarify and understand their emerging sense of calling, the participants experienced affirmation, support, and encouragement. After Mary began sensing her call to ministry, she received "continuing confirmation as a teenager…I still to this day feel called to help people understand God better."

School-age experiences influenced a sense of call. These school-age experiences became times where some participants began to own their faith development, which resulted in a willingness to pursue a call. During these childhood experiences, some participants were

mentored, affirmed, and influenced by pastors and church leaders. Some participants found opportunities to begin developing their leadership skills.

College related experiences. Early church experiences informed college choices. As mentioned earlier, thirteen graduated from colleges, which represented the same denomination in which they would eventually become licensed and serve. Eight of the thirteen had a parent or grandparent pursue ministry training within the same denomination. Twelve had a parent graduate from a denominational college. The participants early experiences in the denomination guided their academic preparation, which led to service in the same denomination. They pursued ministry licenses within the same denomination.

All but one of the persisting ministers attended one of their denomination's undergraduate colleges. Daniel, who did not attend a denominational college, had parents who were pastors in the denomination. Daniel planned to be a doctor and attended a flag-ship state university, where he was a pre-med student. The nine ministers who persisted had well-established roots in the denomination. Three of the ministers who left ministry attended a college outside of their denomination. Fourteen participants sensed a call to ministry before high school was completed. Thirteen made a denominational college choice in part because they believed it was the best for them to train in the denomination in which they planned to serve. Catherine, who felt called into ministry during high school, attended an international university where she studied health care. She felt her call would involve the medical profession and wanted to pursue medical imaging credentials prior to ministry training. Charles, Ken, and Daniel sensed a call to ministry after college graduation. One sensed a call post-high school while serving in the military.

While many attended their denomination's college, it was not always an easy decision. Phineas planned to study political studies at a state school but recalled, "I changed my mind. Decided to go to the denominational university and study religious studies, or religion. Sensing that God was calling me into ministry, but not knowing what that looked like, exactly."

For those who attended denominational colleges, an early sense of call shaped their interpersonal interactions with campus leaders and their involvement in campus ministries. Ron reflected:

I started getting involved in ministry opportunities right away. It was really through the body of Christ, and some significant professors in my life that affirmed the gifts and graces that maybe I didn't yet see, but they saw within me.

Undergraduate preparation for ministry influenced the sense of call. "Affirmation of professors, mentorship of professors. Internships were a really big thing in our program in undergrad. Those internships, both the supervisors and then the people that are receiving the ministry. Peers. Just from a number of different angles," recalled David.

The influence extended beyond those studying for ministry. Otto knew he was called and knew he would go to seminary after college. But he went to college to study mathematics. Otto considered his college years as a training ground for ministry, even without formally majoring in ministry, he recalled his college experience:

My major was not religion or theology like most of my friends, who were gonna go on to ministry, were doing. Still felt like…I was learning to preach. I was playing…music… doing church camps and all of that kind of stuff. So, I always felt like I was on this path towards ministry and never felt like there was a roadblock in front of me. Always just felt

like the doors were opening in the right way. They were saying, "Yes, this is what you're preparing yourself for."

Ken graduated from a denominational college with a degree in history. During college he had no sense of call. In fact, early in life, after experiencing parsonage life as a preacher's kid, he knew he did not want to be a minister. But, "It was like two days after I graduated, I had what was probably a nervous breakdown and I realized that I had not planned to do anything in life besides graduate from college, and once I did that, I realized I had no plan beyond that." He was working in his college's admission department the summer following his graduation. He arrived at an event:

> The associate pastor met us and said, "Oh, by the way, we're between pastors right now, so one of you has to preach in the morning." The team…said, "Alright, you (Ken) can do that" …I prepared my first sermon and the next morning, while I was preaching, I just felt the call and so I decided to follow that.

In summary, college related experiences influenced the sense of call. Thirteen participants attended a denominational college. Their time on campuses, where they were affirmed and provided with a training ground for the practice of ministry, gave them a path toward expressing their call. They were provided leadership opportunities.

Overall, early child and family influence, school-age experiences, and college related experiences influenced the participants. They sensed a call to ministry early in life. Other people encouraged and affirmed them in the process. Many began formal training as part of their undergraduate degree. They were ready to start graduate school and advanced theological education.

Seminary and Post Seminary Experiences

The educational path to ministry for the seventeen participants included seminary. The seminary experience was a different experience than attending college. Seminaries proved graduate level theological education. An undergraduate degree is required to attend a seminary. Generally, a seminary's admission requirements include previous study in a ministry related field.

Soon after college graduation, the participants began attending seminary. Four participants took one year off between college graduation and starting seminary. Catherine waited to start seminary after graduating from an international medical school. Catherine "worked in medical imaging for quite a few years" before going to seminary. Charles started seminary several years after college. He experienced a calling into ministry after high-school while he was enlisted in the Air Force. His journey to seminary began while he was stationed in Japan. Charles was being downsized out of the Air Force. In order to potentially remain, he needed to become a chaplain. Military chaplaincy requires a Master of Divinity degree from an ATS accredited seminary. He had a Master of Biblical Studies degree. Charles described, "My commander got involved and said, 'This is nuts'." Then a General "pushed some paperwork through" to transfer him to a reservist status to allow him and pay for him to pursue the correct seminary degree. The Air Force Chapel Office signed off on the plan and the path was opened for him to become a chaplain. However, as he neared completion of the degree, the Air Force did not call him back to active duty as a chaplain. He was phased out of the Air Force before he completed his seminary degree. Charles ended up pastoring. He left ministry and serves as a community college dean. Twelve participants went to seminary directly after college graduation.

As the seminary innovated with new delivery options—online offerings, more evening classes, and even multi-site options—Ron and Phineas, who had stopped out from seminary, returned to the seminary to finish their degrees. Ron recalled stopping seminary:

> I went to seminary for two years. Our first two kids had come along. Had to find a job that had a little more employment. Seminary did not have a lot of what I would say are student-friendly class options, at the time. I went online and did a master of spiritual formation from another college.

He later returned to seminary when the seminary began offering innovative delivery options. By the time Ron completed his seminary degree, he was pastoring full-time in another state. Leaving seminary to become full-time pastors was not the usual path for most of the participants, but Ron and Nathaniel moved away from the seminary location, became full-time pastors, and completed their degrees via the new delivery options.

> Phineas, who also left seminary after one year, he reflected on why he left seminary:
>
> During that year at seminary, I just kind of grew tired of studying. I wasn't sure where I was going or why I was doing it. I was just there because it was the next thing to do. I felt like I was continuing trying to follow God's call and leading, but not really sure what that looked like. That year of seminary was difficult. I enjoyed the study. I enjoyed being around classmates. It was tough not knowing why I was doing it, and what the goal was. I quit after that year.

Several years after stopping out, Phineas "began really to sense more of a definitive calling and purpose." He returned to seminary, "This time it was a much different experience…having a wife and daughter…I was there, pretty focused…doing what I needed to do in classes."

Ana thought seminary "was a very transformational time. It made me think very critically about my faith and what I believed. It didn't allow for the easy answers. I resonated with that." Ron recalled his seminary experience as far more than class work:

As much as it was preparing me for ministry, it almost was a self-reflective preparing of myself…my seminary experience…was way more about my spiritual vibrance and maturation, my theological maturation, than it was about necessarily preparing me for what happens in church life.

Daniel described seminary as "very formative in my life…especially having gone through a crisis of faith at the end of college." David remembered, "Seminary really, I think, taught me about grace, just because it kicked my butt. It beat the perfectionism out of me. That was good… I'm glad I went through it." Westley, who would leave ministry, noted seminary was "very formative in terms of how I look at ministry, how I look at the church, how I understand myself."

During their seminary preparation, some participants were very intentional about maximizing the use of their time. Ron remembered:

Some people would say you don't learn anything practical in seminary. I think maybe they're looking at—again, it all depends on the experience, but I think that maybe they're looking at it from the wrong perspective because all my practical stuff, I learned because, as I was going to seminary, I was also a lay pastor."

Participants' descriptions revealed a sense of their seminary experiences that went "beyond the curriculum" and the formal curricular requirements for their degree. They reflected on how the lessons they learned from these experiences emerged during their beginning years of ministry. Nine participants, each persisting in ministry, took initiative and became more involved in a local church. Ana reflected, "I loved being a part of that congregation and got opportunities

to lead in different ways and put different things I was learning into practice." Whereas Ron remembered, "You had a lot of people who were hammering through the book knowledge, and through their theological framework, but not embracing a local church. In fact, I knew a lot of people that didn't go anywhere."

Those who persisted noted their extra-curricular involvement exceeded what the seminary curriculum required for graduation. The eight participants who left ministry fulfilled what the seminary required but did not go beyond the curricular requirements. In terms of going beyond the curricular requirements, there was a difference in how participants who persisted in ministry and participants who left ministry spent their time while attending seminary. In order to graduate, each student fulfilled a ministry internship requirement. Each student was required to serve an internship during their seminary studies. They wrote reflection papers and the seminary provided supervision from a faculty member. The seminary also trained supervisors at the internship sites. Westley remembered, "What I really enjoyed about doing the internships was getting to see how other people did ministry." Ken was more specific:

> They (seminary) had practicum. We had to take three semesters where we designed an internship in various places. There was a local church and a non-church setting was one of them. I don't know that those things were all that super helpful.

Mary recalled her internship, "You had to work in a church while you were there and do a certain number of hours in a church practicing things, working in a church, and learning from a pastor." Ken, Westley, and Mary fulfilled the requirement but did not persist in ministry. David described the internships with some sarcasm, "They were very regimented. You had to tie all of your experiences to the outcomes, the denominational outcomes, so they could prove to the accrediting agency blah blah blah blah, and that was annoying, but the internships were good."

Frank reflected on why he could not do more, "I was working 30 hours a week at a job and attending seminary fulltime."

However, in each case, those who persisted found a laboratory context for the application of classroom learning beyond the required internship, initiated and established mentoring relationships with a pastor, and initiated relationships with faculty members that lasted beyond graduation.

Laboratory. Participants who persisted found a laboratory where they could apply what they were learning in the seminary. David recalled the local church becoming a personal laboratory which enabled "getting a strong connection between the practical things I was doing, and how they tied into the academic side of my preparation." These laboratories were places where he could "fall in love with learning," but additionally functioned as places where the intentional application of classroom concepts happened. These laboratories were the places where he became "very engaged in the local church in a number of different ways. Yeah, that was beautiful." Finding and having a laboratory to practice applying theological concepts, Bill explained, "Was really formative to me."

In multiple ways, the participants found their laboratory settings where they could apply what they were learning. The seminary did not require or provide these laboratories. Finding places to contextualize ministry went beyond the curriculum's requirements, Ron remembered:

> If I had critique of it (seminary), again, it would be that there seemed to be a lot of people who just were disengaged from what happens in church life. I think there is—again, I think there is that trickle-down effect, of theology in conversations happening at an academic level that, then, should trickle down, and then what does this look like, flushed out in a local church.

Participants identified the laboratories as critically important pieces for their ongoing ministry. However, for each participant who found a laboratory, their laboratory was in addition to what the seminary required for a degree. Barnabas recalled:

The other thing that helped me in seminary is the last year and a half I was in seminary, I was also the interim pastor at a church…sitting in class…we would talk about these issues that would likely come up in ministry, and then I also had some things I was dealing with in my local parish.

Not each participant utilized a laboratory in addition to the required internship. Frank, a non-persister, recalled a different seminary experience:

Hard. Hard work. Lots of work. That's what school is. In some ways, not as lifechanging as the college environment, but it helped me navigate responsibilities with family and being on my own to a greater degree than college life was. It was just school for me, I guess. I did not connect with as many people or form as many friendships.

Catherine, also worked full-time, used her medical degree to fund seminary, remembered, "Everyone was working in churches, and I was being the non-traditional me and working nights with sick kids and whatnot. I ended up developing a really strong group of friends at the hospital."

Laboratories, in addition to the required internships, enabled further extension of the application of their classroom learning. Each minister who eventually persisted fulfilled the required internship and additionally found a laboratory. They had at least two places—the required internship and the laboratory—where what was happening in the classroom could be applied.

Mentoring. Participants went to seminary to prepare for ministry. As they shared their stories, it was apparent some participants experienced mentoring from pastors in the area. The pastors who provided the mentoring were not their internship supervisors. Not every participant was mentored. Frank remembered, "I wasn't really mentored, and I was just let to figure it out." Phineas experienced mentoring and recalled, "When I returned to seminary, the first Sunday, my spouse and I met with the pastor of our church. We told the pastor we are committed. The pastor welcomed us and involved me in the life of the church." Some participants took the initiative to find mentoring relationships while they were in seminary.

Mentoring relationships were always at the participant's initiative. When participants reflected on their seminary experiences, they identified the important mentoring they received while in seminary. Mentoring remained a current ministry practice necessary for sustaining ministry. Nathaniel remembered:

> We started meeting, and he really modeled to me what it was to be a spiritual mentor; also the importance of a spiritual mentor. It really was from that point forward that I said it is an absolute necessity to have a least one spiritual mentor, if not more in my life. When I even pursued a pastoral ministry and talked to the DS (District Superintendent), I said, 'There's two requirements I ask: one that I can finish seminary, and two, that I have a spiritual mentor' and I have been blessed with a few spiritual mentor since being a pastor.

Faculty relationships. Each participant thought highly of the faculty. Mary recalled, "Professors were thoughtful, and kind, and engaging, and unafraid of disagreements. They really tried to understand where people were coming from and discuss differences…in a very good

way." Catherine remembered "walking into the professor's office and just having an amazing long conversation about some technical detail in Romans." Ana enjoyed the open-door policy:

> Most professors, if you just wanted to set up a time and say, "This really struck me, and I just want to talk through this more." I never had a professor say, "I don't really have time for that." It was always, 'Yeah, come by the office and we can talk about it."

Some participants connected to faculty in personal ways. The nature of these relationships extended beyond the professor's office and what was taught in the classroom. Phineas described the professors:

> We had wonderful, wonderful professors who were interested in not just the passing on of information to the students, but really kind of being a resource and coming alongside of the students. That's one of my I think probably favorite things about seminary, was the relationships that I formed with my professors, who still to this day remain good friends. One of them was the person I chose to pray for me at my ordination. Their work in seminary went way beyond the classroom.

The influence of these relationships extended from seminary into their beginning years of ministry. Nathaniel remembered, "My parents' marriage fell apart during seminary. Professors were right there for me. I was thinking about this calling and being sustainable for ten years, one thing, I think, and I've got to thank Professor XX."

Faculty relationships extended beyond graduation and into their first years of ministry. The long-term nature of these relationships, particularly when facing challenges, struggles, or needing support, were evident early in ministry. Ana, facing the possibility of forced termination at her church, reflected, "There's been different times we've called professors up from seminary and said, 'Can you talk through this with us? Is this normal? How do we approach this?'."

Seminary experiences influenced how the participants began their ministry. The theme was beyond the curriculum. Participants went beyond the curriculum, on their own initiative, by finding laboratories to contextualize ministry, by finding mentoring relationships to help with ministry application, and extending faculty relationships into their beginning years of ministry.

The participants also described their post-seminary experiences, the period of time following seminary graduation but within the first five years of completing their seminary experiences. These experiences are described in five categories: support, barriers, perceived fit, learning from others – especially leaders, and transitions.

Participants migrated from seminary to variety of ministry roles around the world. There were lead pastors of local churches. For example, Barnabas remembered going down to the rural south to "a little church of about 80, 85 folks, something like that." There were staff pastors with various responsibilities. Otto recalled, "It was a Korean congregation in the metro area that was trying to become more multi-cultural. Literally, the then senior pastor…said, "Kevin, you're bi-racial. You understand 'multi-cultural.' You should come be our English Ministries pastor." There were entrepreneurial ministers who pioneered new pathways for ministry expressions outside of local churches. Pepper reflected on his desire to not go the traditional ministry route:

> If I have an opportunity to sustain my ministry, and my ability to preach and help churches, or whatever form of ministry it's going to take; if I have the ability to support that without taking a paycheck from the church, I'd much rather do it that way. That was when I started looking into becoming an actuary and pursuing that and that's been the road I've been on since.

Given the economic conditions around the time of respective graduations, participants often accepted pastoral roles that offered no salary or very little pay. Otto noted:

The second church I was at, I was paid $100.00 a month. That's certainly not going

sustain me, and they knew that. I knew that, but I had two other jobs on the side that

allowed for me to kind of exist.

Churches paid very little, so in multiple situations, graduates like Phineas described,

"Working a full-time job in a different industry, and working at a church part-time on a volunteer

basis." Using non-paying pastoral roles, or offering very little pay, churches offered pastoral

service credit. Credit moved the participants toward their goal of ordination. Pastoral service

credit is defined as the number of consecutive years in a recognized role as a pastor in or of a

local church. Each participant seeking ordination was aware of the need to fulfill service years.

Daniel recalled, "Full-time paying roles were rare. Yet, I never felt that I was getting into

ministry for just a job or a paycheck. It was a sense of a vocation."

During these early, first-assignments years, transitioning from the student role to the

pastor role, ministers prepared to encounter challenges. Ken remembered, "When I left seminary,

I went and was an associate pastor…for two years intentionally because I felt like I needed some

more hands-on experience." The focus shifted from being successful students to being effective

pastors. David reflected on the transition:

> The theological concepts and the language don't translate easily in some of the ministry
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> contexts. You have to work very hard to say, "Hey, what's the value there?" and then
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> "How can I flesh that out in a way that people will grasp it and it'll be meaningful to their
>
> lives?"

Support. The practice of ministry required the perception of support. Where participants

perceived support, post-seminary experiences were generally viewed as positive. Support was an

important component for all participants. However, a perceived lack of support caused frustration and existed as an ongoing experience for those who decided to leave ministry.

When beginning any new ministry assignment, the perception of support was important. Ongoing support at the beginning of ministry enhanced a culture which sustained ministry. Ken recalled, "I drove two hours back for the first few months to be a part of that (support group)." During a particularly challenging time at a local church, David reflected on the need for support. He shared, "That was critical…I am convinced we would not have stayed…without that, I sincerely don't think we would've stayed." Barnabas recalled his first post-seminary church, "From my board I had complete support, and from most of the church I had complete support." Bill reflected on the support he experienced on his first district:

> The senior pastors actually met…together, every week on Wednesdays. Only about half of us that were senior pastors did every week, but I think it was the second Wednesday of the month, we did…something where all the pastors on staff could come. That was normally fairly well-attended. Had a support system there.

Eight of the nine ministers who persisted referenced explicit support from their district leader. Nathaniel remembered a lack of support, "I think probably the biggest challenge I face is district leadership…district leadership is very distant, distant from the ministry where we are at." The district leader influenced how ministers perceived the level of support they received. The district leader's support was not dependent upon the ministry role. Ana, who worked in a part-time staff role, remembered, "Our District Superintendent was a really good support for us. We went to the district office and met with him…and talked with him multiple times…we were able to talk through some things with him."

However, not everyone perceived support. Catherine, completed a geographic relocation to start a new ministry, reflected on her need for support from the district. She expressed her frustration:

> Not feeling heard or understood, I think was probably the largest challenge for me, just really seeing how clearly what I was setting out to do was outlined from my perspective and how I could easily accomplish it. With the support of the district, it would have been so much easier to accomplish… just having their support.

Catherine decided to leave ministry.

Otto, initially remembered feeling supported, "I sensed… they (district) cared enough that they were going to come alongside as they could, and as was needed." After relocating, he lost the sense of support. He left the ministry feeling unsupported. Charles, who left local church ministry, described his first pastorate as a time with "Not a whole lot of support…I would have really, really liked more support from my DS …I knew he was always there…I didn't really feel confident in just calling him up."

Participants who remained in ministry did not solely rely on district leaders for actual support. They initiated pathways that would enable them to experience support in ways that would help them face challenges related to their local ministry. A primary source of support was regular interaction with more experienced pastors. It was important that opportunities to interact with more experienced pastors regularly happened. Key district leaders created opportunities for this to happen by regularly convening pastor gatherings. These gatherings were open to all ministers regardless of role or years of experience. Nathaniel remembered meeting with other pastors, "We met every Friday for a year and a half, about four or five of us pastors, just to pray together and support each other, encourage each other."

Whether the participant served as a lead pastor, a staff pastor, a new start minister, a chaplain, or another other role, the ways that district leaders personally interacted with the participants increased or decreased a perception of support. Those who left ministry perceived a lack of support from the district. Those who remained in ministry perceived support from the district.

Barriers. A barrier to long-term ministry was a perceived lack of support. Perceived barriers were an impetus for ministers to permanently leave the ministry. After a few years of ministry, serving in volunteer international settings, being licensed on four different districts in two different countries, Catherine returned to North America, where she remembered, "I knew that my husband and I needed that (support) as well…we felt pushed away. I worked really hard and was disappointed by the lack of support in the church." She further explained, "We did not feel heard or understood by the church or the leaders." She was told by leadership, "To go back to a local license…after several years of experience, all of my education, 2000 hours toward ordination, and serving around the world…I have learned to look after you. Look after yourself and take care of yourself because you are the only one who can." The local license is not considered a clergy license. She was being told by district leaders she could no longer be clergy. She permanently left licensed ministry and the denomination.

Relocating geographically often increased the need for support. The minister in a new area looked for and needed to sense support. But where support was not experienced, Otto recalled:

I think I was disillusioned and disheartened, very discouraged, and felt very isolated. I felt very alone in the whole process. It got to a point that it was, "I am certainly not making a living doing this, and I'm working elsewhere. Maybe, right now, it would be

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better for me to focus more there"…I did not feel very supported or encouraged by

district leadership.

Barriers kept participants from receiving support. However, other participants who relocated took the initiative to create alternative pathways for support. Ken, who geographically relocated twice, reported how he initiated support, he found "a new minister at one of the churches in town…we have a lot in common, so we meet pretty regularly."

Frank perceived a lack of support when a district board, responsible for licensing, held him accountable to meet their expectations. Prior lack of communication and general frustration with the licensing and ordination process contributed:

> They (district board) said, "You've made no more progress in your call to ministry. You still don't have a call to preach necessarily, and you haven't been preaching. You don't know what you're doing with your call. I don't recommend that you continue your district license." That basically means I had to start over in ministry with a local license for two years, a district license for at least two years while working as—with a pastor in title in a church before I could become ordained. I really feel like ordination was a part of my calling.

Perceived fit. Post-seminary participants chose first ministry assignments. This process of identifying and selecting a first ministry assignment was very important in the career trajectories of the participants. Charles noted, "Carefully evaluate the church you choose." As described earlier, each had internship experiences, others also had laboratory experience. However, now they were making important choices.

Participants talked about this selection as "fit." This notion of fit applied in two ways. First, fit included what they specifically thought about the local church and community setting.

David remembered, "We're a blue-collar community, and I just identify with that maybe a little bit more than a fast-paced business culture." Second, fit also included an evaluation of the specific pastoral tasks required of an assignment. Fit existed when and where the tasks aligned with skills. Phineas described his first assignment as "A natural fit for what my natural passions were and what their needs were. They were getting somebody for free. It worked out for all of us." Ana and Daniel, a married couple, seeking their first assignment, described turning down a church assignment because of a perceived lack of fit:

> We'd had someone else call us and we talked with them and very quickly felt like it wasn't the right fit for us or the church…Their philosophy of ministry was drastically different from mine and Daniel's… their approach to ministry…the types of things they did as a church…felt very attractional…very high, high energy…that's not our personalities…not our philosophy of ministry. Our philosophy of ministry is much more long term developing deep relationships, investing in people, and so I think…right fit, and not feeling like a right fit, was…we weren't gonna' be the kind of people that they were looking for and we weren't going to be able to be authentic and do ministry that way.

After serving in specific ministry contexts, perceptions about fit changed. Perceived fit evolved from describing fit based on the task requirements to a description of fit based more on the overall church culture. David, while searching and interviewing for a second assignment, reflected on fit in terms of how to make a choice about an assignment, "Right fit is less about what it (task) looks like and more about being in a church that does the right stuff, stuff that makes sense." Phineas, described his fit after relocating to a full-time ministry assignment:

I feel like it did kind of fit that specific…area of ministry…we had been praying about

and just trying to discern for a number of years. To be…doing it…seeing needs met…

having that be confirmed by those that were recipients… of my ministry. It just felt good.

In some cases, how participants perceived their fit influenced decisions to leave a

ministry assignment, or to completely leave the ministry. Mary recalled, following graduation, "I

did not see how I fit with my sense of the (church) system." She described her perception of fit

as an "intuitive sense…important, but I am not sure what fit is."

Fit was also negatively framed from an organizational effectiveness perspective. Frank

countered, "The church has a goal. Do you fit it? Yes or No. If yes, then you serve. If no, you are

encouraged to go elsewhere." From Frank's perspective, the organization, not the person, made

fit decisions. Frank's perspective of fit stands in contrast with Ana's view of fit. She described

fitting into her ministry assignment:

It was very collaborative. It was very, "We're going work together as a team and we're

going figure this out." There wasn't a time crunch. There wasn't like, "We're going be

ready to launch you guys as a separate congregation in a year and a half." It wasn't like

that. It was just very much like, "We just want someone who can help us walk and will

walk alongside us as we figure out how to minister to our community and this portion of

our community." That resonated a lot with us and how we wanted to—that being part of a

pastoral team resonated with us a lot.

Learning from others: Especially from others. Learning from others was a formative

post-seminary experience. When pastors entered their first assignments, they resolved problems

by learning from others, especially from other leaders. Learning in their new role as pastor often

required knowing when and who to ask for advice to help resolve problems for which they felt unprepared.

The new pastors relied on already developed leader networks when facing problems. Networking began while many of the participants did their undergraduate training in their denomination's college. Bill reflected on his leader network, "Having gone to college as a ministry major and through seminary, I've got some folks that I can talk to about that kind of stuff. Like I say, hey, this is what I'm facing, what would you do?"

Relying on the expertise of other leaders was task specific. When needing to deal with specific financial and organizational challenges, Charles, relied on his leader network, "I'd run things by my military chaplains off of the Air Force base and those on the Air Force base." When reflecting on resolving financial and staff challenges as a first-time lead pastor of a large church, after a few years in a staff role, Ron remembered, "I don't know that I was prepared for the really pragmatic…I get multiple voices involved. I don't try to solve the problem on my own." While dealing with interpersonal conflict, Daniel recalled:

> I just had that reaction of thinking I need to consult people who have a lot more experience in ministry than me. I need to consult peers and professors and my parents who had been doing this for longer, because their wisdom is invaluable, and it was.

Learning from others was a common post-seminary experience for ministers in their first assignment. However, after resolving crisis after crisis, juggling multiple jobs, and dealing with low or no pay, learning from others in the process, Charles reflected, "It took so much out of me that I was dog tired, that I didn't have it in me to really try to maximize the next phase of the church, and time to work out."

There were others who left ministry, and noticeably absent from their stories was the role of outside expertise when facing challenges or needing support. Mary remembered, "I just decided I wasn't going to stay in ministry. I didn't even talk to anyone about it."

Transitions. Only one participant remained in the same assignment through their first five years. Times of transition were common. Transitioning from one assignment to another often included moving from volunteer pastor roles to full-time pastoral roles. Phineas recalled, "It feels good to be living out God's call in a full-time role." In one transition, Phineas went from volunteer pastor to full-time pastor and from one ministry context to a completely different geographic context. He reflected on the transition, "You are kind of adapting to a new way of doing things, to new mindsets. You're constantly having to rethink."

Ken was presented with an opportunity to move. When considering the transition, Ken remembered, "We were having a child and my wife was commuting 40 minutes each way to work, so there was a number of things that were weighing on us." Ken evaluated his current assignment and concluded the current assignment "felt like an unsustainable situation" because "relationships were not as healthy as they should be."

Nathaniel remembered his first move, "I've lived in big cities…then we moved to a town of a few thousand people where life is just clearly different." Changes in ministry location also brought opportunities for pastoral skill development and a broadened sense of one's calling. David recalled, "I want to do what's best for my family right now."

Often when dealing with challenges, ministers considered transitioning to new ministry locations or new ministry roles. During transitions, ministers developed self-awareness. When considering a move and the assumption of new responsibilities, Ken noted, "I wasn't even at a

position in my life to know myself well enough to improve anything. A big part of that was recognizing my own tendencies."

While considering a transition to a new assignment because of a conflict in the church, Barnabas instead of moving decided to directly address the conflict:

Part of me deeply wonders if sometimes we can't pussyfoot around so long that we end up causing more hurt…let me just pat you on the head, keep you pacified, rather than calling out your junk for what it is.

Transitions also required dealing with financial realities. Because of early decisions to accept pastoral roles with very little pay, and the impending stress upon those families caused by lack of financial resources, ministers considering transitions thought more about their personal finances. Daniel remembered, "My wife and I have a two-year-old and one on the way…we're constantly wrestling with finances and paying back our school loans, including…(seminary). When looking for a first post-seminary assignment Teresa reflected, "Had I known that our finances would dictate so much of our choices, I probably would have made more plans ahead of time to make sure I had the funds."

The participants shared five post-seminary experiences. First, perceptions of support influenced the pastoral experience. Second, some participants faced barriers to sustained ministry. Barriers eventually contributed to those ministers leaving. Third, how ministers perceived their fit to an assignment, task, or organization shaped how they thought about ministry. Fourth, learning from other leaders was an important aspect of the first-five years. Fifth, times of transition were common. The next section describes how participants developed self-care strategies.

Self-care strategies. While reflecting on experiences during their first five years, the theme of self-care emerged. Ministers were intentional about developing strategies to help them sustain their work in new and often changing contexts. Ken recalled, "Honestly, I feel like designing some self-care has been the most challenging part of ministry."

In their first ministry days, they adjusted to demanding schedules, managed a variety of expectations, and navigated personal and professional responsibilities. Charles verbalized that at time they "were spread too thin" and made adjustments. Recognizing the need for a care strategy emerged early for some. Ken shared:

> We went through a lot…moving into a nontraditional system, we threw a baby into the mix, and my life just got chaotic. It was…a number of things having a hindrance on our marriage and relationship. Just realizing that I didn't feel like I had enough solid ground under my feet to help somebody else. It really was a gradual…getting to a point where like, I need some help with this before I can even do what I feel like I'm called to do.

The need for self-care also emerged when trying to meet perceived expectations collided with the recognition, "I just cannot pastor in a way that's not me," Barnabas reflected.

Two themes emerged as self-care strategies: they began to focus on balance in the face of schedules, tasks, and need for role clarity; and they started learning how to manage expectations.

Balance. Early-career ministers often worked multiple jobs to make financial ends meet. Therefore, they ended up with one or more paying jobs. Multi-vocational ministry was the reality for fifteen of the seventeen participants. The reality of financial struggle and need for multiple jobs was a consideration early in the process of finding a role. Otto remembered, "I see that as kind of a big challenge, post-seminary, is, where can we go? Where can we serve, and actually survive?" Ron recalled, "Then because our first two kids had come along, (I) had to find a job

that had a little more employment." The financial demands of being in ministry roles without much pay required learning to balance. Daniel reflected, "We're constantly wrestling with finances and paying back our student loans."

Multiple jobs were not always negative. Phineas asked his mentor what he should do when he was offered a well-paying, full-time marketing job while searching for his first ministry role. Phineas recalled:

He advised me to take that other job…that was a profound conversation at that time. It took me a little bit to kind of make sense of that. Looking back, I'm thankful for his advice. Because he knew that a job in ministry would have its challenges, especially monetarily. This other job would help alleviate some of those burdens, for paying for seminary and some of those other things. He knew that that would help in the long term.

Sometimes the request or needs of a family triggered an awareness that balance was required and necessary. David shared:

My wife's aware of it. She tells me about it, thankfully. I am glad she does…I know I am pastoring well when I am in balance in life…when I balance my nights are home versus my nights in ministry…my kids start to show it in their behavior.

Beyond a family request or need, when participants identified that ministry was not going well, it was because of a lack of balance. Ana noted, "I recognize that I have absolutely no margin in my life right now." Margin was used a template for time and schedule, she continued, "I get out my calendar… 'what do you have open next month?'…There's no margin left for the people I am supposed to be serving."

Reflecting on permanently leaving ministry, many participants recognized balance and self-care as necessary. Catherine remembered:

Look after you. Look after yourself, and take care of yourself, because you're the only one who really can…There's lots of—life goes in every which way or direction, but don't forget about you in the midst of ministry, because it can be so motivating. The whole burnout thing, I would definitely encourage them to stay on top of.

Managing expectations. Participants began pastoring with several expectations. Three expectations were common. First, there was an expectation that ministries would grow numerically and financially under their leadership. Second, there was an expectation that ministry would be fulfilling all the time. Third, there was an expectation that the people charged to their care would like them. However, during their first five years they experienced a different reality. The reality of a first assignment collided with their expectations. Charles recalled, "I don't think I was prepared to go into ministry with real expectations. I was tri-vocational. It was exhausting." Ministry was far harder than expected. Ministries did not grow as expected. Bill shared:

I really thought, and now even saying it, I know it sounds so arrogant. I really thought I would preach and the people would just come. I was pretty sure going there, that I'd be the best preacher in town. The folks would just hear about the young preacher and start coming there because of that…Was not there for real long when I realized that wasn't happening.

Reflecting on their earliest ministry expectations, the participants felt their expectations about ministry aligned with, or were affirmed by, their respective leaders and church boards. Boards and leaders expected the new minister's presence would cause growth. Therefore, everyone would be fulfilled, and people would like the new minister. However, what the

participants believed and what they were told were different than what they experienced. Reality was different. David shared:

> I guess I had the expectation that we would at least stay level or things would increase but at least stay stable, and my entire five years was just decline. There's no other way to put it than that. I think it was hard on everybody—people, pastor, senior pastor. It was tough.

> There were times when church people felt they had the right to tell the pastor how to spend their time. Bill recalled, "One thing that was different…people wanting to tell me how I should spend my time. I know at least one person on the board thought I should spend at least 20 hours a week in visitation." Nathaniel remembered, "I feel much more like an employee here than a pastor." Learning to manage expectations was vital. Otto shared:

> No one really explained to me how to graciously have expectations, how to graciously say, "These are actual needs that are important." As I look at ministry and the possibility of accepting a role, these things I do have to actually take into consideration.

> Early in ministry, participants recognized the need to for balance and for managing expectations as part of developing a personal care strategy. Personal self-care consistently emerged during the first five years of ministry.

The final section describes how participants reassessed their sense of call.

Reassessing the call. Reflecting on what ministry was like during the first five years, while serving in multiple kinds of ministry roles, the participants reassessed their sense of calls. As suggested by their stories about growing up, each had a sense of call from an early age. Their sense of call influenced college and seminary choices. They believed they were called by God to serve in some type of pastoral role in a local church. Ken shared, "A moment of total surrender

to God that changed who I am, and it was shortly after that that I felt a real call to preach." As described earlier, they received affirmation regarding their call from local churches, leaders, faculty, and mentors. Formal ministry academic preparation and seminary degrees were completed. After numerous interviews, meetings with multiple boards, they were granted licenses to function as clergy. They were now ministering in locations around the world. They were in charge of ministry. However, now face to face with the day-to-day realities of ministry, they reassessed their sense of call. David reflected on a particular challenging time in his first assignment:

> Ministry just got smaller and smaller…church got smaller and smaller. That was just hard. Being in an atmosphere where you're losing momentum was very much a—it was a drag…It's just like, "Is somethin' wrong with me?" "Is somethin' wrong?" "Do I not know enough?" "Am I the wrong person?"…Just all sorts of questions. Like "Should I leave?" "Should I go to a different place?" "What's going on here?"

While preparing for ministry, they imagined their call a particular way. Phineas recalled, "I couldn't do anything else and be happy." However, following placement in a beginning ministry assignment, a reflective reassessment began. Phineas shared, "There's something always gnawing at me, wondering if what I'm doing really matters, if it's really worth anything, if it's really changing lives." Nathaniel reflected, after several very difficult years, "At the end of the day, the one thing I still cannot get away from is that I can't do anything else. That this is what I have been called to do." Simultaneously, while knowing he was called call, Nathaniel also reassessed, after "all the stuff we had been through, I was just exhausted, and I didn't know that I had it in me."

Participants felt the challenge to connect work from their theological preparation to their day-to-day work. Ana shared:

At seminary, you study the ideals, like this is the ideal for a theological approach to discipleship. This is the ideal for a theological approach to worship…but when you go into your church, nobody's gonna' be on board with that…but how do you help move a congregation through that. You don't come in and just implement this is the best way to do something, so we're gonna' do it that way. How do you come in and recognize and exegete in a sense where the congregation currently is?

Reassessing a call emerged in three ways. First, a sense of call was expanded. Their sense of call became broader than how they initially thought about it. Second, a sense of call was limited. For some, during their first assignments they placed limits on what and how they were willing to live out their call. Finally, there was a reimagination of the need for a ministry credential to function as a minister.

Expanded sense of call. Persisting ministers expanded their sense of call to ministry. To better understand how a sense of call expanded, I want to revisit how participants described their earliest sense of call and how, after reassessment, the sense of call expanded. For some, an initial sense of call focused on a call to particular ministry roles. Ana shared her earliest sense of call, "I thought it (call) was children's ministry." David recalled his earliest sense of call, "I really interpreted it (call) as a sole call to youth ministry." For others, an initial sense of call focused more on specific tasks. For instance, Ken knew, "I was called to preach." For others their earliest sense of call was more ambiguous. Phineas noted he was "Sensing that God was calling me into ministry, but not knowing what that looked like, exactly."

During the course of their first five years, reassessment of that earliest sense of call happened. David explained, "As I've lived into it (call), it's more of a call to be pastor and however God will flesh that out."

Notably, those who persisted beyond five years, sought and embraced opportunities to do multiple tasks, to engage with multiple people, and to serve beyond the scope of their assigned responsibilities. Their calls expanded, always including more than they initially sensed. Nathaniel told his board, "I'd say well, you elected me to lead, so here's what we're gonna do." After reassessing, he reflected on his changed approach to ministry, "Listening to people matters. Never forget that you're dealing with people. People just are always funny. Then, again, I wish they had told me to be patient."

Serving in specific local church contexts, Phineas recounted ministry was "not necessarily in the big, in the grand…I think that's what my expectations were. What I've seen is ministry, good ministry taking place over a long period of smaller movements and conversations and events."

As participants transitioned from the seminary context to specific geographic and local contexts, their sense of call expanded to include the people within that specific context. Ron remembered:

> I'm not from a blue-collar community. I grew up in a white-collar community…To be quite honest, when I first came here, I struggled with some of the differences between those two worlds, but over the years, have grown to just love people and the people of my community, the bluntness that comes along with a blue-collar world, the non-sugarcoating, non-façade that comes with, hey, this is who I am, take it or leave it.

Additionally, with an expanding sense of call, participants embraced doing new and unfamiliar tasks. When the participants began their assignments, they did not expect to do certain ministry tasks. They felt that since they had not trained to do certain tasks, they would not have to do them. However, as their sense of call expanded, they adopted, learned, and loved doing new tasks. Ana, who's sense of call at the beginning of ministry did not include the preaching task, reflected:

> I love when I get the opportunities to preach. I don't get them very often, but I love those opportunities…I love the preparation of it. I love the delivery, seeing how people are connecting, and hearing people afterwards say how God used it to speak to them or seeing how it might challenge someone's thinking and help them grow. I really like that.

Limited sense of call. Ministers who left often began to limit their sense of call to ministry to specific tasks and functions. Participants who left ministry also reassessed their call. However, the process was different than those who persisted. The process included limiting their sense of call. A sense of call was limited to include doing only those specific ministry tasks that she/he was willing to do. Frank recounted:

> After the three years on pastoral staff in a position that I was not just suited well for, at least in my opinion—I was doing fine in my job, but not having a heart for it—I told the pastor, 'I am not fulfilled in this. I would like to step down. Is there another position that I could be doing that is more along the lines of my gifts and graces?'

A limited sense of call became visible when decisions to leave ministry happened. Mary remembered:

> I didn't even talk to anyone about it…I was like, well, I have a baby. My husband will need to get a job because he had more school debt than I. A pastor's salary could not

have paid the school bills, so I decided I don't need to renew…I knew having a child, and

we knew we'd probably have more, that I wouldn't be going into full-time ministry any

time soon…I didn't regret it, but it was kind of letting go of what I had originally thought

I was supposed to do or be.

Other times a limited sense of call resulted in more subtle decisions. Decisions were

made that limited where the participants could follow a call and serve in ministry. Westley and

Teresa, both seminary graduates, following graduation, decided to move to a new location.

Westley shared:

Both me and my wife had a lotta debt…Together our combined student loans were

somewhere in the range of like $90,000.00. We were trying to figure out, "How in the

world are we going pay off $90,000.00 of student loans?" We decided, "Okay, let's

figure out how to pay off loans.

Teresa became a teacher to help pay for their combined student debt. They relocated to an

area of the country where she could obtain a quick teacher's credential, receive a full-salary, and

begin paying off student debt. Their plan included Westley finding a church assignment. They

limited the sense of call to one geographic area. There were no churches open in the area for

them to serve out their calling as pastors.

Reimagined license. As a reminder, a minister's license grants the rights and privileges

to function as a legal minister. However, the need for a path to formal recognized ministry was

reimagined by some. Ministers, classified as leaving ministry, found they could more effectively

fulfill their callings without a traditional license. They did not see the need for the license, the

rights, or the privileges of functioning as a licensed minister. Ordination was not a goal for them.

Credit toward ordination became a non-issue.

Pepper described his early sense of call, "I felt very called in that traditional sense of the word, very called to full-time ministry and felt like what I was gonna do with my life was gonna be a pastor." However, even though he would be classified as permanently leaving the ministry, he continued to reference himself as a minister:

> I really enjoy that my ministry isn't financially dependent on the church liking what I'm saying. I really enjoy that I don't have to always be thinking about growing an organization in terms of doing it through avenues like church growth, which, as a strategy is a strategy that can work, but can also feel somewhat hollow at times, so I really enjoy those things. I really enjoy—it's kind of all in the same bucket of not being dependent on a church to pay my salary. I feel like I get to do ministry in a more creative and open way than if I was a pastor, and a sustainable way.

Pepper and Catharine concluded they did not need a formal license to consider themselves as doing ministry. They reimagined the need for and purpose of a license. They found fulfillment living out their call without the need for or demands of a formal license. They meet the study's definition of leaving ministry because they no longer have legal documentation to function as clergy. However, they still consider themselves as ministers serving in ministry. Catherine described:

> I still feel a call to ministry. I still feel like what I do on a daily basis is very much ministry…people didn't understand…they were trying to find us jobs…I was like, "I'm working 80 hours a week"…this is our ministry, and this is where we feel called to be right now.

They reimagined ministry outside the traditional boundaries of a local church or denomination. Yet, their sense of call remains strong. Pepper shared:

I was on this path toward ministry and never felt like there was a roadblock…doors were

opening…this is what you're preparing yourself for…this lightbulb was going on…If I

have an opportunity to sustain my ministry and my ability to preach and help

churches…without taking a paycheck from the church, I'd rather do it that way…that's

the road I have been on since…our podcast on marriage is a ministry…it's not explicitly

Christian…we're not wrapping everything up with a Bible verse, but we do view it in a

lot of ways as a ministry towards building healthier relationships and to build marriages.

They are pioneering new paths for ministry, going beyond local churches. They fulfill

their respective calls in non-traditional ways. Catherine described:

One of the reasons—we opened a retail store with the express purpose of creating a space

where people who would never walk into a church door would congregate and would

connect…I see our business as a ministry. We've always operated under that premise.

The participants reassessed their sense of call during the first five years. It was an

ongoing, iterative process. The reassessed sense of call was manifest in three ways: an expanded

sense of call, a limited sense of call, or they reimagined the need for a minister's license.

Summary

Participant voices guided us through two broad periods in their lives. The first broad

period described early and formative experiences in three ways: family and childhood influences,

school age experiences, and college related experiences. The second broad area described

seminary and post-seminary experiences. Seminary experiences were described three ways: the

use of laboratories, finding a mentor, and developing faculty relationships. The post-seminary

experiences were described five ways: support, barriers, perceived fit, learning from others –

especially leaders, and transitions, self-care strategies, and reassessing the call.

Seventeen participants shared their experiences about becoming ministers. They served in unique ministry roles around the world. Calls into ministry and paths out of ministry were never similar. They shared heartaches, joys, and frustrations. Each faced and negotiated multiple challenges to various degrees of resolution. All perceived different levels of support. Together their stories comprise a longitudinal description of the first five years of ministry.

The participants' stories of their experiences in these different phases of their self-formation processes provide us with an opportunity to understand more deeply why some participants chose to stay in ministry, some left, and some re-imagined their role as ministers. In the next chapter, I analyze more closely the practical and theoretical implications of these stories for how we might better understand these differing career trajectories. To guide this analysis, I use the concept of "organizational fit."

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The final chapter revisits the purpose of the study and provides a discussion of the findings and implications for practice, the professions, and further research. The interpretation and discussion section include three broad areas. I first compare differences in the experiences of those who persist and those who do not. I then compare the findings of this study to the literature on attrition and retention to the ministers and, more broadly, with the professions. Finally, I discuss how the research on organizational fit aligns with or is challenged by the findings. The chapter concludes with a summary.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study was to explore the formative experiences of seminary graduates by looking at their experiences through the construct of perceived organizational fit (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). Seminary graduates occupy what I refer to as an "at-risk career phase because of the number of ministers who leave ministry during the first five years of ministry. Various clergy attrition rates suggest 50-85% leave ministry during their first five years. (Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Meek et al., 2003; Oswald et al., 2003; Spencer et al., 2012). Burns and Cervero (2004) suggest the long-term habits necessary for ministry persistence are shaped during first five years of pastoral ministry.

Seminary graduates are not the only careers experiencing high attrition during the early-career years. The study of early-career ministers is situated within a larger body of research exploring attrition and retention in other helping professions. Teachers (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011), nurses (Crow et al., 2005), student affairs professionals (Silver & Jakeman, 2014), lawyers (McDonald, 1998), and mental health care workers (Kwok, 2013) also indicated high rates of attrition during an early-career phase. Research conducted in these helping professions

also established the early career years as formative and influential when making critical career decisions related to persistence or non-persistence (Crow et al., 2005; DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Kwok, 2013; Liebenberg, 2011; Margolis, 2008).

My study's framework was informed the construct of organizational fit but more specifically the notion of perceived fit. Perceived fit/misfit is a psychological construct located primarily in the mind of the person deciding whether fit exists or not (Billsberry et al., 2005, 2010; Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). Organizational fit research posits that the "fit" between a person and her/his organizational environment influences job/role satisfaction, motivation, performance, and long-term commitment to an organization or profession (Judge et al., 2002). Very little is known about how the notion of perceived fit is constructed (Kristoff-Brown & Billsberry, 2013).

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with seventeen seminary graduates. The participants spent portions of their first five years in a wide variety of ministry roles. Nine of the participants persisted beyond the first five years but at the time of their interview had not yet completed an eighth year of ministry. Each of the nine intended to remain in ministry. Eight of the participants left ministry before completing five years of ministry.

Interpretation and Discussion of the Findings

The findings chapter focused on describing experiences shared across the career trajectory. The section is organized around three areas. First is a section discussing differences in experiences between persisters and non-persisters across their career trajectories. Second is a section discussing differences between the literature on attrition and retention and what my findings discovered. Third is a section discussing why the language of perceived fit should be extended to include new meanings.

Differences: Persisters vs non-persisters. The differences between persisters and non-persisters are presented in two areas. First is a discussion about differences related to the early and formative experiences. Second is a discussion of the differences related to the seminary and post-seminary experiences.

Early and formative experiences. Career trajectories began in childhood with an early sense of call. There are four differences related to their early and formative experiences: clarified call, direct affirmation, college leader interaction, and networking.

Clarified call. Foster (2006) suggests the call is a pivotal spiritual moment, which rings true for each minister who persisted. Training for ministry is rigorous and requires an extensive commitment. Often times a minister enters the preparation process believing a call is to a lifelong vocation (Hoge & Wenger, 2005). Each persister who had an early sense of call clarified that call by the time they finished high school. Clarified their call means the persister had no doubt they wanted to be in ministry and believed their call was for a lifelong vocation. The result was they finished high school and entered colleges with a very clear choice of major and vocational path.

However, for non-persisters, their early sense of call was not clarified before completing high school. Even though they entered preparation for ministry directly after high school, their call had not been clarified. This is not a statement about preparation for ministry. Each enjoyed their preparation. There were no regrets about their training. However, they began ministry preparation before their calls were clarified. While a clarification of call often happened for non-persisters, the clarification of a call always took longer for non-persisters than for persisters.

Direct affirmation. Persisters regularly experienced non-family members who directly and consistently affirmed them during their high school and college years. The consistent presence of an affirmer contributed to the earlier clarification of call. The direct affirmation

happened in the context of a local church. However, the affirmer was not always the pastor. The persisters recounted how people in their local church affirmed them. In childhood, the persisters were involved in churches where they consistently experienced affirmation.

Non-persisters did not share experiences of regular and direct affirmation early in their career trajectories. They were part of churches which were open and welcoming to young leaders. However, their churches were not places of consistent and direct affirmation from non-parents. The non-persisters received most of their affirmation from their parents and grandparents. Direct affirmation was a difference between persisters and non-persisters.

College leader interaction. Upon entering college, persisters noted regular interaction with college leaders. Key college leaders impacted persisters through their college years. College leaders noticed the persisters' leadership capacities. College leaders consistently encouraged persisters to pursue leadership opportunities. College leaders helped them decide to attend seminary. College leaders helped them understand denominational processes. Regular college leader interaction was influential on their career trajectories.

Non-persisters did not share experiences about college leaders who regularly interacted with them or who noticed their leadership abilities. The non-persisters spoke well of college leaders but did not talk about how the leaders impacted them beyond the classrooms. Non-persisters were involved in campus ministry opportunities but did not experience interaction with college leaders.

Networking. Persisters began developing networks with pastor-leaders in high school. Persisters were part of local churches and district contexts where, as early as high school, they regularly met and interacted with area pastors. Later these early developed networks provided a resource for the persisters to seek advice when they encountered unique or challenging ministry

problems. Persisters entered ministry with a level of confidence because they had a pre-established network they could consult for problem-solving. The existence of long-developed networks enabled them to engage in complex problem-solving. Because networking started in high school, the persisters could call someone in their network at each career phase—facing a problem in college, they called someone in their network they met in high school; facing a problem in seminary, they called someone in their network they met in college.

Non-persisters did not develop leader networks across their career trajectories. When non-persisters faced complex problems, they were often left to figure it out on their own. Where they mentioned a network, the network's development began in their first assignment. When they moved assignment locations, they developed new networks. They did not sustain networking across career phases.

Seminary and post-seminary experiences. I observed four differences between persisters and non-persisters related to seminary and post-seminary experiences: curricular expectations; ways they referenced the seminary faculty; personal initiative; and support.

Curricular expectations. Persisters always exceeded the seminary's degree requirements. Persisters went "beyond the curriculum." While the curriculum required successfully completing a ministry internship, the persisters completed the internship and simultaneously found an additional place to practice ministry. Each persister exceeded the seminary's minimal requirements to complete their degree.

Non-persisters focused their time on completing the curricular requirements. They were satisfied with what they learned in class and from their internship. They completed the necessary requirements and received their degrees. Non-persisters did not share seminary experiences

where they intentionally exceeded the seminary's requirements. Those who did not exceed the curricular requirement left ministry.

Ways they referenced faculty. Persisters engaged with faculty at personal and social levels. Faculty members and persisters became friends. The persisters sought faculty relationships beyond the classroom and academic material. They found faculty members receptive to beyond the classroom relationships. After graduation, persisters always felt they could call a faculty member for advice. Persisters referenced faculty members as friends. They recognized faculty members offered more than content expertise or knowledge. Faculty relationships continued well past the first five years of ministry for each persister. These deeper faculty relationships were formative during the seminary part of their career trajectories, but the relationships continued to have a formative influence into the post-seminary phase.

Non-persisters appreciated and respected the faculty. They referred to the faculty as "nice" and spoke positively about their seminary experience and what they learned. However, non-persisters did not engage in a relational manner with faculty members outside of an academic context. Non-persisters consistently referenced faculty members in terms of faculty member's knowledge and content expertise.

Personal initiative. Persisters manifested initiative across their career trajectories. Personal initiative became more pronounced as they progressed through each career phase – childhood, high school, college, seminary, and post-seminary. For instance, in high school the persisters sought leadership opportunities. In college the persisters sought multiple campus leadership roles. In seminary the persisters initiated laboratories for contextualizing their classroom learning, initiated mentoring relationships with pastors, and initiated relationships with faculty. Post-seminary, the persisters initiated pathways to find support. Post-seminary,

when opportunities to serve were not readily apparent and available, persisters initiated opportunities to serve; even volunteering to pastor for no pay.

Non-persisters showed initiative in high school by finding leadership opportunities. However, as non-persisters moved through each career phase, initiative became less pronounced. In college they were involved in campus activities but did not seek leadership roles. In seminary, they did not initiate laboratories, mentoring, or faculty relationships. Post-seminary, they waited for someone else to support them. Non-persisters waited for opportunities to be given to them rather than initiating opportunities to serve.

Support. Persisters experienced support during the post-seminary career phase. They noted a consistent culture of support on their districts and particularly noted how support was offered by district leadership. Regardless of the persister's ministry role, they experienced support as readily offered and available. Persisters created pathways to find additional support when they felt they needed more support. Support pathways emerged from the context of districts providing regular opportunities for their ministers to gather—regardless of ministry role or status.

Non-persisters experienced a lack of support. They felt unsupported on their districts and particularly did not feel supported by district leadership. Non-persisters often did not attend pastor gatherings or did not mention an awareness of gatherings on their districts. It is interesting to note where persisters and non-persisters served on the same district they had completely different interpretations of support. One persister found plenty of opportunities to receive and find support while the non-persister from the same district referenced the lack of supportive opportunities.

Summary of differences across career trajectories. Several differences existed between persisters and non-persisters which influenced their career trajectories. First, persisters clarified their call by the end of high school. If or when a non-persister clarified their call it was during college or seminary. The clarified call shaped how the persisters experienced their initial training for ministry. Second, persisters were directly and consistently affirmed during high school. Non-persisters did not receive direct and regular affirmation. Third, persisters experienced college leader interaction. Where the persisters went to college with a clarified call, they quickly became part of ministry groups. In those groups, persisters regularly interacted with college leaders. Non-persisters began their college experiences without a clarified call. They did not immediately become part of campus ministry groups. Therefore, during their college experiences, they missed the college leader interaction. Fourth, persisters began networking during high school. During each career phase persisters added to their networks. The leaders comprising their networks provided guidance and advice through each career phase. Non-persisters did not develop network across their career trajectories. They started anew during each phase.

During the seminary and post-seminary phase there were several differences. First, persisters exceeded the seminary's curricular requirements. Non-persisters did only what was required. However, the lessons the persisters learned "beyond the curriculum" helped them start ministry knowing how to apply academic concepts to local church contexts. Second, persisters referenced faculty relationships. Non-persisters referenced faculty knowledge and content expertise. The persisters sustained faculty relationships beyond their first five years. Non-persisters referenced no faculty contact after graduation. Third, persisters manifest personal initiative across their career trajectory but it was especially prevalent during seminary and post-seminary career phase. Initiative was used to find opportunities to serve, to create pathways for

support, and to go beyond the seminary curriculum. Non-persisters decreased in initiative across their career trajectories, showing little initiative by the time they got to their post-seminary phase. Fourth, persisters found consistent support. Support was offered by districts and district leadership. Non-persisters experienced a lack of support, which seemed to contribute to their decision to leave ministry.

Differences: Previous research and findings. The literature review in chapter two identified causes for attrition and interventions used to increase retention. A quick summary of previous research on the most common causes of attrition noted teachers and nurses left careers because of burnout, stress, dissatisfaction, or poor salary (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Crow et al., 2005; Silver & Jakeman, 2014; McDonald, 1998; Kwok, 2013). Of the common causes for teachers and nurses, ministry research also identified burnout and stress as common causes for ministers to leave (Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Stewart, 2009)

However, previous ministry research noted that a lack of salary rarely motivated a decision to leave ministry. After exploring 17 career trajectories, I do not agree with their finding. Salary and financial concerns were consistent challenges. Fourteen of the 17 referenced finances as a concern. Eleven of the 17 participants started their first assignment receiving little to no pay. Six of the 8 non-persisters specifically shared how lack of salary and student loan debt consistently influenced their career decisions. Financial constraints influenced decisions about where to serve. Financial constraints impacted the decisions related to relocation. Three of the 8 non-persisters referenced their combined debt. While Hoge and Wenger (2005) and Stewart (2009) suggested salary did not motivate departure, I suggest from my small sample a lack of financial resources contributed to decisions to become non-persisters.

Looking broadly and thematically at causes of attrition and interventions designed to increase retention, there are four areas where my study contributes: support, role of the leader, mentoring, and push and pull factors. Each of these areas will be discussed separately.

Support. Support and lack of support have been regularly identified as causes of retention or attrition for teachers (Clandinin et al., 2015; Crow et al., 2005; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007; J. Rippon & Martin, 2006). Hoge and Wenger (2005) suggested the need for support was necessary to increase persistence of ministers. The need for support was confirmed in my study. All 17 regularly needed and sought support.

Persisters received support directly from individuals and served in organizational contexts where a supportive culture existed. Research from both teaching and nursing (Crow et al., 2005; Jones & Youngs, 2012) suggested experiencing direct support from an individual and working in a supportive culture increased retention. However, in addition to receiving individual support and working in a supportive culture, persisting ministers initiated alternative pathways to find support. My research supplements previous findings and includes how early career ministers not only experienced support but generated support.

Leaders. The leader of a school building is the key person for creating supportive, high morale cultures for teachers (Jones & Youngs, 2012). Hoge and Wenger (2005) and Stewart (2009) suggested the absence of support for ministers was often because of conflict with jurisdictional leaders. The absence of support was a key motivation to leave ministry (Burns & Cervero, 2004; Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Stewart, 2009).

I observed district leaders were key to persistence decisions where they created district cultures of high morale and support. High morale and supportive cultures were key indicators

leading to increased teacher retention (Bleeker et al., 2012). The nine persisters consistently referred to the district leader as the most influential person supporting them.

When a school leader supported their teachers retention increased (Gallant & Riley, 2014). I found the district leader's support of pastors—whether the pastor was in a lead pastor or in a volunteer staff role—was identified as a critical factor helping pastors feel supported.

Mentoring. Mentoring increased teacher retention where it was intentionally designed to provide support for new and veteran teachers (Long et al., 2012). Mentoring was found to increase a teacher's sense of belonging (Rippon & Martin, 2006). However, opportunities for structured mentoring have been limited in ministry because of isolation and alienation (Hoge & Wenger, 2005).

Mentoring during the seminary career phase was a common experience for persisters. Non-persisters did not seek mentors. The mentoring relationships established in seminary continued into and through the first five years. Mentoring relationships enhanced a sense of belonging in the vocation of ministry and increased a sense of belonging in particular assignments. Mentoring influenced career decisions and informed task-related solutions when facing unique problems.

Push and Pull Factors. Push and pull factors in my research are different than previous research. Previous research (Hoge & Wenger, 2005) used push factors to describe how a minister involuntarily departed ministry; they were "pushed" out. Furthermore, Hoge and Wenger (2005) used pull factors to describe how a minister voluntarily departed ministry; they were "pulled" out. I found push and pull factors were more nuanced and complex than solely explaining departure decisions. Push and pull factors were integrated across career trajectories. Six factors

happened across the career trajectory: outsider, financial, opportunities, support, district context, and early interest in ministry.

The first factor was where participants felt like an outsider. The factor became most noticeable during the seminary career phase. Participants identified how they felt like outsiders while attending seminary. The result of feeling like an outsider led them to not engage with faculty at a relational level. However, their sense of feeling like an outsider was also manifest during their first assignments where they never felt like they were completely accepted.

A second factor were financial considerations. Financial considerations were identified across the career trajectories. The implications of the financial push began as early as the school age years. It was during school age years where some participants decided to pursue academic paths that would give them employable skills while they were in ministry. For others, the decision to take on student loan debt, marry someone who also had taken on debt, accept first roles with very little pay influenced decisions. Missing from all participants was an early and realistic picture of the financial hardships related to sustainable ministry. No participant acknowledged an awareness of the financial reality they expected to encounter upon their seminary graduation. No participant recognized how significantly student loan debt would shape their earliest ministry experiences. However, multiple participants identified the financial hardships as direct influences upon decisions to relocate, accept new roles, accept non-ministry roles, or eventually choose to permanently depart.

A third factor was opportunities. The earlier a person clarified a sense of call, the more those persons benefitted from later opportunities to develop ministry skills. Those who did not persist in ministry often clarified a sense of call later in their career trajectory. The result was missed opportunities to develop ministry skills early in their career development.

A fourth factor was the role of support. Those who left ministry sensed a lack of support. They did not have mentors, outside leaders, or supportive networks. The result was ministry departure. Those who persisted, received support across the career trajectory. Support was ongoing from their earliest sense of call.

A fifth factor was the district context. When a participant's ministry assignment was on a district with a supportive leader, participants persisted. However, not all district leaders were supportive. Participants who left ministry consistently identified district leaders and the lack of support as factors pushing them away from ministry. Participants who persisted consistently identified district leaders and the intentional development of support networks from their earliest sense of call as contributing to their abilities to persist, problem-solve, and thrive in ministry.

A sixth factor was an early interest in ministry as a vocation. Participants experienced an early interest in some aspect of ministry during the early and formative period of the career trajectory. It was often in the context of a local church leadership experience. In that early interest a skill could be explicitly developed. Their early interest was recognized, affirmed, cultivated at the local church level, extended through the college and seminary academic preparation, and resulted in persistence. Those who became non-persisters also experienced an early interest in non-vocational ministry opportunities. They reimagined what ministry might look like for them.

The role of push and pull factors needs to be extended beyond simply describing how persons pushed or pulled out of ministry. There needs to be inclusion of how persons are pushed and pulled into ministry and how those push and pull influences happen across career trajectories.

Summary. Previous findings indicated attrition causes and interventions aimed to increase retention involved the themes of support, leader roles, mentoring, and push and pull factors. The experience of support across the career trajectory was important to persisters and non-persisters. However, I observed persisters generated pathways to receive support. They did not solely rely only on the district leader to offer support. Whenever a persister needed support, they initiated a way to find it. Non-persisters perceived a lack of support which is confirmed by previous research.

Persisters valued district leaders who provided personal support and created district cultures of support. While the finding aligns with previous research from education regarding the leader's role in creating supportive cultures (Jones & Youngs, 2012), the finding challenges previous clergy attrition research. Previous research suggested district leaders functioned primarily in a role of placing pastors in assignments (Hoge & Wenger, 2005) and were identified as sources of conflict (Burns & Cervero, 2004; Stewart, 2009) leading to departure. In my study a district leader was never a source of conflict. The district leader either directly supported or created opportunities for support.

Persisters placed a high value on seminary mentors. The role of mentors aligns with previous research from education (Kelly & Northrop, 2015). The finding challenges clergy attrition research which suggested mentoring was limited because of pastoral alienation (Hoge & Wenger, 2005). However, effective mentoring in the context of my study began while the participants were students. No participant identified an ongoing mentoring relationship beginning after seminary graduation.

Push and pull factors influenced persisters and non-persisters across their respective career trajectories. Rather than feeling pushed out of ministry by an external cause such as lack

of support, or pulled out of ministry by an offer of a greater salary, persisters and non-persisters experienced both push and pull factors during different career phases.

Organizational fit. Organizational fit research posits the "fit" between a person and her/his organizational environment influences job/role satisfaction, motivation, performance, and long-term commitment to an organization or profession (Judge et al., 2002). The process of determining fit is the interaction between the person and the organization. The interactive process of gauging compatibility is called the theory of person-organization fit (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013) and is one of the most common theories in organizational and industrial psychology. The theory of fit is often used to explain why workers identify with a specific organization (Anaza, 2015) or are attracted to particular organizations (Carless, 2005).

My research was informed by the notion of perceived fit. However, since perceived fit is individually constructed, very little is known about how the perception of fit develops. Perceived fit/misfit refers to a psychological construct located primarily in the mind of the person deciding whether fit exists or not (Billsberry et al., 2005, 2010; Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). There is an intuitive sense that "fit" is important and relevant, but little is known about how people construct their notions of fit or what these various conceptions of fit might imply for effectively addressing professional attrition. (Billsberry et al., 2010; Cable & Judge, 1996; Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013).

I found ministers consistently used the language of fit to describe their experiences. However, my data suggests the language of fit was complex. The complexity of perceived fit was unique to each participant. The notion of fit was an important criterion at the outset of ministry decision making. Participants used fit to describe a process of determining whether or not to go to a first assignment. Participants decided whether or not to relocate across country,

take a low-paying role, or consider different ministry roles based on how they perceived a fit to that place, salary, or role. The decision to go to a specific place, to accept a particular role, or accept a lesser pay, was a different process than whether or not to stay or leave. There was a difference related to decision making at the beginning of ministry when compared to decision making about staying or leaving later in ministry.

There was a change in how the participants used the language of fit that began after a person was in an assignment. When participants were asked to describe what they meant by the term "fit," they explained fit using the language of meaningfulness. Framed differently, they perceived fit when they felt they were doing meaningful work. The description of fit as meaningful work was consistent across persisters and non-persisters. Meaningfulness of work refers to a spontaneous and continual effort to find meaning irrespective of the conditions and that the work is experienced as worthwhile, purposeful, or valuable (Allan, Duffy, & Collisson, 2018; Janik & Rothmann, 2015).

Since little is known about how perceived fit is constructed, I suggest the perception of fit also includes meaningfulness. After beginning a ministry assignment, meaningfulness was used three ways to describe their perceived fit: staying in an assignment, leaving an assignment, and a new ministry category.

Staying in an assignment. Where and when ministers described pastoring as meaningful work, they desired to persist. Ministers found satisfaction from doing meaningful work.

Previous clergy research indicated placing pastors in poor assignments motivated leaving ministry (Hoge & Wenger, 2005; Klaas & Klaas, 1999; Stewart, 2009). Persisters and non-persisters described poor church placements as dissatisfying, yet still described their pastoral work as meaningful pastoral work. The use of meaningful work differed from career satisfaction

or career dissatisfaction. There was a deeply personal aspect to the meaningfulness of their work, which extended beyond the categories of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Persisters were willing to endure dissatisfying circumstances when they were doing meaningful work. Participants worked multiple jobs while pastoring because they found their pastoral work meaningful.

Leaving an assignment. Non-persisters described a more nuanced connection between perceived fit and meaningful work. Non-persisters retained a sense of hope for the vocation of ministry. They did not leave ministry because they perceived a misfit with a church, a denomination, or a calling. The meaningfulness of work also describes how non-persisters framed their perceived fit. For instance, two participants, whose life circumstances required their presence as stay-home moms, still perceived a fit with ministry. They have not abandoned their calling, but the way they perceived fit placed a greater value on the meaningfulness of their work as stay-home moms. They remain active at a church but are no longer classified as ministers. Two non-persisters are pursuing doctoral work. They perceive a fit to the ministry vocation but derive greater meaning from their work as students.

New category. Three who left ministry still consider themselves as ministers. They see no need for a ministry credential. One serves as a college dean while finishing a doctorate in higher education. He sees his teaching and administrative role in a community college as meaningful ministry. Another believes having a formal minister's license is not required for the work he wants to do. He perceives a fit to doing ministry but not a fit to following the required processes for a license. He describes his work outside of traditional churches as meaningful ministry. The third calls herself a minister. She owns a retail business. She describes her retail work and interaction with customers as meaningful ministry.

Each of the three developed a sense of ministry without a license while taking seminary coursework. They attributed their seminary studies as significantly helping them view ministry outside of traditional pathways. Each of them describes their work as meaningful. Their use of perceived fit was shaped by the work from which they derived the greatest meaning.

My data suggests perceived fit is used when deciding to go to an assignment or accept a particular role at the beginning and meaningfulness describes persistence. However, after starting an assignment perceived fit is constructed around the meaningfulness of work. Where meaningfulness exists, perceived fit exists. Meaningfulness is used to describe three areas. First, meaningfulness is used to describe staying in an assignment. Second, meaningfulness is used to describe leaving an assignment. Finally, meaningfulness is used to describe a new category for ministry.

The career trajectory. Life experiences, spanning the career trajectories, shaped how participants thought about ministry. These findings in chapter four were presented around two broad categories: early and formative experiences followed by seminary and post-seminary experiences.

Participants shared stories about early formative experiences in churches and at home. They shared how those early experiences shaped their sense of call. Participants positively interacted with churches and districts from an early age. They shared school-age memories about persons who influenced them by noticing and affirming their leadership abilities. They were given opportunities to interact with other leaders. Additionally, where positive interactions happened, a sense of call was affirmed.

They reflected on formal training paths through college and seminary. They shared about college leaders who consistently impacted them and helped them clarify a call to ministry. They

shared about campus leadership opportunities they were given from their earliest college days. Participants shared about contextualizing their academic lessons into local church laboratories. They benefitted from mentoring, which extended from seminary into their beginning years of ministry. They spoke of relationships with faculty, extending beyond classrooms and content matter.

Participants also faced challenges spanning their career trajectories. Early health challenges, deaths of loved ones or friends, and crises of faith formed a desire to help people. A desire to help other people expressed itself as an early sense of call.

Financial constraints, relocations to new geographic areas, reassignment to new local church assignments were common ministry challenges. As the participants faced challenges, they faced barriers, experienced support or lack of support, they began implementing self-care strategies. In the face of their challenges they reassessed their sense of call. Some even reimagined ministry and the purpose of pursuing license.

While facing challenges, the perception of support remained high for those who persisted in ministry. They experienced support from district leadership or created pathways for new forms of support. Persisters generated their own support when necessary. They did not wait for someone to come alongside to provide support. However, where a perceived a lack of support happened, those graduates became non-persisters. The lack of support was often attributed to lack of district leader's support.

Implications for Practice

I suggest implications for practice around the career trajectory outlined in the findings chapter. The ministry career trajectory began in early childhood. The formation of ministers

began in local churches when participants were very young. The career trajectory for the study ended with post-seminary.

Family and early childhood. Local churches need to implement pathways for children to be involved in experiential ways in local churches. Participants who sensed an early call to ministry were involved in their local churches. These participants had early memories of attending church and serving with specific responsibilities. These early experiential opportunities provided a context within which the participants specifically began sensing a call to ministry and within which that call was clarified.

These early local church experiences should include leadership responsibilities. For instance, some children might be involved in the technology aspect of church. They could run slide shows, design stage lighting, or run the sound. Their involvement in these technological areas provide a backdrop upon which leadership skills are developed and direct affirmation can be given. Furthermore, when children are entrusted at an early age with responsibilities, the benefits of learning how to take personal initiative are being cultivated. Additionally, when children are entrusted with responsibilities, they are placed in environments where their abilities may be recognized and where mentoring from other adult leaders may happen.

School-age. First, local churches need to train leaders in the art of affirmation. Participants who received direct and consistent affirmation during their school years ended up persisting in ministry. Research on teacher attrition noted the importance of emotional support (Le Cornu, 2013b). Emotional support in the form of direct affirmation can begin at an early age in local churches. When adult leaders are trained in the art of affirmation, the leaders also need to be placed in environments where they can directly affirm school-age children. These learning

environments should become intentional aspects of a church's ministry to its school-age children. These environments may function as laboratories for leadership development.

Second, ministry training programs for youth pastors need to stress the importance of recognizing, affirming, and entrusting young persons with leadership responsibilities. Gallant and Riley (2005) noted the importance of a leader's influence for creating cultures of support. The youth pastor is a leader who can have a direct impact. When those sensing a call to ministry were affirmed by a youth pastor, they persisted in ministry. Specific classes in the training programs need to be added that will train pastors in how to recognize a person's gifts and strengths then how to develop a culture that supports the development of those gifts and strengths.

Third, districts need to offer programs geared toward helping high school students clarify a sense of call. In the college setting, where a career choice is clear, persistence is increased (Willcoxson & Wynder, 2010). When ministers clarified their sense of call before high school was completed those ministers persisted. Districts can implement programs in the area of career and vocational development. While the focus would remain on a call to ministry, the findings also suggest the importance of the district in helping students begin to recognize that their call to ministry may take a variety of forms. However, if a call to ministry is clarified early, those students who go to college benefit from an early awareness.

Fourth, there needs to be candid and transparent conversations about the cost of being a minister and pursuing academic preparation. Finances influenced persistence and retention. Pursuing a high level of academic preparation for ministry, and incurring substantial debt in the process, that ultimately leads to low paying, even volunteer pastoral ministry, roles will continue to burden families, schools, and local churches.

College. Colleges need to provide co-curricular opportunities for students who have a call to ministry and those who think they may have a call. Both groups need to be included. The college needs to identify key college leaders to participate in these events. Furthermore, colleges need to invite area pastors to participate in these gatherings. These events would provide a rich training opportunity for students to experience interaction with leaders and begin developing leader networks with the area pastors. Students interacting with key college leaders and early leader network development were common experiences for those who persisted. Intentionally providing those opportunities gives students space to grow and develop their skills for ministry. Futhermore, these events may also be financially sponsored by districts. Districts have a vested interest in those who are pursuing a call to ministry. Districts will benefit long-term when ministers do not leave ministry.

Seminary. First, revisit seminary curricular structures and consider increasing graduation requirements related to leadership involvement in a local church. Persisters regularly and consistently noted how their leadership experiences in local churches exceeded the requirements for their degree.

Second, the seminary can broaden its approach to theological education beyond degrees solely preparing graduates for formal pastoral roles. Programs could be redesigned, or completely new degrees offered, in order to account for persons who want theological education but have no intention of pursuing pastoral work.

Post-seminary. District leaders need to regularly offer opportunities for pastors to gather. Gatherings were noted by each minister who persisted. The absence of gatherings was noted by the non-persisters. Pastors at this point in their career trajectories needed to seek the expertise of pastors who were more experienced. These gatherings can become opportunities for ministers to

create additional pathways for support. Additionally, the gatherings may become opportunities for mentoring. Where leaders provided opportunities for support, persistence was increased (Gallant & Riley, 2014; Long et al., 2012).

Second, professional learning communities need to be established. The learning communities would help pastors who do not have established leader-networks. They would provide another layer of support. They would also become learning laboratories where new ideas could be discussed with more experienced leaders. The learning communities can be initiated by district leaders but should not rely on the district leader's for structure, schedule, or intended outcomes. These communities provide additional opportunities for mentoring and support.

Across all phases. There needs to be intentional personal financial training in age appropriate ways across all phases. Salary and economic realities continue to impinge upon ministry. Finances regularly influence career decisions.

Implications for the Professions

I present four implications for the professions. First, the development of leadership training programs related to how a leader's role impacts the culture of an organization may assist in creating cultures of support. The leader is a key to morale, support, and persistence which have been shown to increase persistence (Gallant & Riley, 2014; Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007). My findings support the ongoing need for support for workers and the need for leaders to be the key person generating support.

Second, training programs in other professions should consider offering extra-curricular opportunities beyond formal degree requirements. Attrition research in education noted how pre-career expectations collided with on-the-ground realities (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007; Le Cornu,

2013). Offering additional extra-curricular opportunities may help workers enter the profession with realistic expectations which in turn may increase persistence.

Third, salary, dissatisfaction, and burnout continue to be linked to attrition (Kelly & Northrop, 2015). My study confirmed a link between departure and financial constraints. Financial training and financial literacy need to be addressed across multiple professions.

Fourth, professions need to consider how early affirmation and early identification of leadership capacities may lead persons into particular careers. The interventions addressing teacher attrition and nurse attrition focused on interventions which began after a person started their career (Long et al., 2012). I found career decisions are also made early in life. Early experiences shaped persistence.

Implications for Future Research

There are four implications for future research. The first potential area for future research is an exploration of the qualities and characteristics of mentoring relationships. While the education field has existing research related to mentoring as an effective way to retain teachers, mentoring is a newer concept in ministry. However, there are no descriptions of what comprises good mentoring within or for the ministry. Not all mentoring is effective (Kelly & Northrop, 2015). Expanding the sample size or exploring different career phases could produce a description of quality and effective mentoring. Furthermore, understanding the characteristics good mentoring may impact multiple professions.

A related second area for future research is an exploration of faculty and student relationships. While my study indicated these relationships were formative for those who persisted, exploring and understanding how these faculty-student relationships developed warrants additional study. If more can be known about the ways these relationships develop, it

could impact ministry training programs. A third potential area for scholarship is an exploration of initiative in multiple career phases. Why do some persons take initiative and others do not? Does initiative continue to increase as a person moves into different career phases?

The fourth area to explore is social capital. Sixteen of the seventeen participants had long histories in the same denomination. The nine participants who persisted and took initiative had a family member who was a pastor or key church leader. Two of the participants who left had family members who had been in ministry, and one of those two had a parent who permanently left ministry after a bad experience. Fourteen of the participants did undergraduate work at denominationally affiliated universities. The three who did undergraduate work outside of a denominational setting left ministry and perceived a lack of support.

Summary

The purpose of my study was to explore the formative experiences of seminary graduates by looking at their experiences through the construct of perceived organizational fit (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). The goal of the study was to describe the career experiences of seminary graduates. Exploring their experiences across their career trajectories yielded rich insights. The result is a longitudinal description of the experiences of individuals seeking to pursue the ministry and their career trajectories, spanning from early childhood through their post-seminary local church service.

Seventeen seminary graduates entered ministry but eight of them left ministry before finishing five years. Nine persisted beyond their initial five years. The persistence and attrition of ministers began with formative experiences early in life. Formative experiences continued through each career phase. During each career phase there were differences between those who persisted and those who were non-persisters.

Participants described their notion of perceived fit using the language of meaningfulness. Participants intuitively used fit to describe how they felt about ministry. Fit is a psychological construct located primarily in the mind of the person making decisions (Billsberry et al., 2005) One of the research goals was to explore how graduates constructed their notion of fit. Since little is known about how perceived fit is constructed (Cable & Judge, 1996; Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013), I suggest a perceived fit includes meaningful work.

The call to ministry is a spiritual moment (Foster, 2006). Those who left ministry described angst and heartache. They never lost their sense of call. They fondly remembered they were called. The call continues to impact them, as evidenced in their sense of what they do as ministry, even outside of the formal designations and licenses for the ministry.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Participant Descriptions

Phineas

Phineas sensed God's call to ministry early in life. Growing up, his family was active in the Catholic Church. His parents were always involved in church leadership. While in high school his family started attending a denominational church where he would eventually serve. Phineas planned to go to college and to study political science. However, as other people affirmed him, he decided to attend a private, denominational college to study to become a minister. Following the completion of his degree, he began attending seminary. However, he stopped attending after one year. After a five-year break from seminary studies, during which time he married and had his first child, Phineas returned to seminary and completed his degree. His first ministry assignment was part-time at a church of 800 people. He served part-time and worked full-time in an unrelated field. Near the end of his first five years of ministry, Phineas, his wife, and two children transitioned to his first full-time ministry assignment.

David

David grew up in a pastor's home where you experienced the beautiful and the ugly of the church experience. Growing up one thing he was certain of, "I did not want to be a pastor." However, David sensed God's call unfolded during his high school years. A youth pastor confirmed David's leadership potential and gave him places to practice leadership skills. People in the church congregation noticed and affirmed those skills. He enrolled in a private denominational university to study to become a minister. While attending, David experienced faculty mentoring, affirmation, and served in internships. After finishing college, "I did not want to go to seminary. I thought it was stuffy, dead, dull, and boring. So right out of college, I was like, 'I'm not ever going back to school, ever.' Within a year, I was like, 'I think I want to go

back to school.'" He enrolled in seminary. While in seminary, David worked as a church assistant, taught classes at the church, served on different church committees, and worked with the teenagers. He took his first full-time ministry one year before graduating from seminary. He has served in ministry as a youth pastor and as a small groups pastor at two different churches.

Ron

Ron's family left the Russian Orthodox Church and began attending a protestant denominational church. Ron's father, while not a pastor, became the music director. Ron attended a private, denominational university. Following his graduation, he took a year off, got married, and then enrolled at the seminary. He attended seminary for two years then stopped out. The seminary class schedules did not fit with his work and family-life needs. Ron took a full-time job, enrolled in an online master's program offered by a different institution, and graduated. By the time he finished his online degree, the seminary offered different learning options which fit his life schedule. He re-enrolled and graduated from seminary. Because Ron took his first full-time ministry while in graduate school, he commuted for modular, intensives to finish his degree. He has served as a children's pastor, a teaching pastor, and a lead pastor at two different churches.

Daniel

Daniel grew up a minister's home. His parents served in international settings. Daniel had no intention of being a minister. He graduated from a flagship state university with a biology degree. He intended to attend medical school. While pursuing medical school admission, he moved in with his parents. Over time, while enrolled in state university master's program, Daniel realized he needed to study for ministry. He enrolled in seminary. During seminary he remained

very active in a large (2,500) local church. Daniel and his wife, Ana (described below) serve as associate pastors. Daniel is full-time.

Bill

Bill grew up in a pastor's home. His dad was a part-time youth pastor and full-time educator/coach. Bill's dad passed away while Bill was in high school. Bill sensed God's call early in life. He came home from kindergarten and announced that he was going to be a minister. Of that time he said, "I have always had this inkling that maybe ministry was something that I was called to do." He enrolled in a denomination university. He planned to attend one year to satisfy his mom. After graduating from the denominational university, he attended seminary. While in seminary, Bill was active in a local church. During a church transition, Bill and others became the leaders of the youth group. Following his graduation, he married and accepted his first pastorate. He was the lead pastor of a small rural church. They provided a house to live in but very little money. Periodically he would receive eggs as a form of pay. He has been lead pastor at three small rural churches.

Ken

Ken grew up in a pastor's family. He is a third-generation pastor. His dad often pastored in small towns. Ken enrolled in a denominational college. He began sensing a call during that first summer after college. He enrolled at seminary, worked full-time, and took five years to graduate. Following graduation, Ken became an associate pastor because but now serves as a pastor. They are working on the development of a community center.

Ana

Ana's family was active in church. Her grandfather had been a pastor. They attended a church her grandfather had started. Ana enrolled at a denominational university where she

studied Bible and theology. Following graduation, she took a year and served as a volunteer missionary in another world area. Following her year of service, she enrolled in seminary. During seminary, she met her husband, Daniel (mentioned above). They serve as associate pastors. Ana serves one church in a part-time capacity but also has a second ministry job.

Nathaniel

Nathaniel grew up attending church. His parents were always active in leadership. His grandfather was a pastor. He studied business in college with the intention of attending seminary. Nathaniel became a full-time pastor and commuted to seminary for intensive modules. After graduating from seminary, Nathaniel remained at the same church where he continues as the lead pastor.

Barnabas

Barnabas grew up attending church. His family was active in their local church. He began sensing a call at the age of 17. He enrolled at a denomination university. Following graduation, Nathaniel enrolled at seminary and received a full-ride scholarship from his undergraduate institution. He finished seminary in three years. Following seminary, he and his family accepted a full-time pastorate.

Frank

Frank grew up attending church. His dad was a pastor but when I was young "he had a bad church experience where the church basically chewed him up, spit him out, and kicked him out of church. He had a rough experience with that. He tried to find other pastoral roles. He remained involved in church but lost his ordination. He has been fighting back for that ever since." In spite of that experience, the family remained active in the local church. Frank sensed a call while in high school. He enrolled in a denominational university where he studied to become

a missionary. Following graduation, he enrolled in seminary. While in seminary, he attended a large church, but did not find opportunities to be involved. Following graduation from seminary, he accepted a part-time, volunteer ministry role. After three years he stepped down. He and his family remained at that church. He has since given up his credential and left that church.

Mary

Mary grew up in church. Her parents were active. She sensed a call around age 12 following a significant health issue. She enrolled in a denominational college. Following her graduation, she enrolled in seminary. Her husband was in a Ph.D. program while she was in seminary. She served a church for a short period of time following graduation. When they relocated for her husband to finish his degree, she decided ministry was not for her. Mary gave up her license and has no interest in serving as a pastor.

Charles

Charles grew up in a family that was largely disinterested in church. As a teenager he began attending a church on his own. Around the age of 20, while serving in the armed forces, he sensed a call to become a military chaplain. He finished college while in the military. He began seminary looking to simply meet the mandated requirements of becoming a military chaplain. As he neared graduation, the military chaplain role was no longer an option because of military cutbacks. Charles began looking for church ministry assignments. He accepted a pastorate. He worked at that church for four years. He left pastoral ministry and is now a community college dean and pursuing a Ph.D. in higher education.

Otto

Otto attended church as a child with his grandma. They walked to the neighborhood church. He began to sense a call around the age of 15. He went to a private Bible College, near

his hometown. During his college years he served as an interim youth director. Following graduation, he enrolled in seminary after district leadership suggested that "you should probably get some denominational education somewhere in the process." While in seminary, he served in a variety of church pastoral roles, including at a multi-cultural Korean church as the English Ministries Pastor. Following seminary graduation, along with a pastoral role, he taught a few classes at a small private college. Eventually, at the request of his home church, Otto moved back to his home state. He was supposed to help his home church start a new church. After the lead pastor resigned, Otto did not renew his license. He is now pursuing a Ph.D. in historical theology and hopes to teach.

Pepper

Pepper grew up in church. His parents were always involved in church leadership. He sensed a call to ministry in junior high. He attended a denominational university and studied mathematics. Soon after graduating he enrolled in seminary. While in seminary he accepted a non-denominational, part-time pastoral role. Following seminary graduation, he remained in the same part-time role for one year. After that year, he decided to not pursue any full-time church role and gave up his minister's license. He decided he could have a "more effective ministry outside of the church, without recognition, than inside it."

Westley

Westley grew up in church. His dad and grandfather were both pastors. He attended a denominational college and then enrolled at seminary. He served in multiple church ministry roles. Following seminary, he and his wife (Teresa, see below), began seeking church roles. However, after several horrendous interviews with churches, they realized that financially and emotionally they would be better off if they both worked full-time outside of the church.

Catherine

Catherine grew up in church. Her parents were both involved in church leadership. She attended college out of the country and pursued a degree in medical imaging. She imagined a ministry as a healthcare missionary. During college she went on multiple medical mission trips. Following college, she worked a few years in the healthcare field and went on multiple mission trips. Eventually she enrolled in seminary. She and her husband planned to serve as missionaries, but due to educational policies were not able to do so on a full-time basis. Following seminary, they served 18 months as volunteer missionaries and started multiple ministries. However, due to funding issues, they moved home. After a short stay home, serving in interim ministry assignments, they relocated. After arriving in the new area, they contacted the denominational leaders. There was not a sense of welcome or understanding. Catherine was forced by the district leadership to begin the ordination process over. After having a district license for several years, transferring that license to multiple districts around the world, and graduating from seminary, she was told her previous experiences did not count for ordination.

Teresa

Teresa grew up in church where her parents were always involved. Her dad became a pastor while she was in elementary school. She sensed a call at an early age. She went to a denominational university where she studied early childhood education. Following graduation, she enrolled in seminary. While in seminary, she and Westley (see above) married. Following graduation, and several horrendous interviews, she pursued a teacher's credential and began teaching in the public schools. At this point, she has no interest in being a pastor.

APPENDIX B: Consent Form

Dear Participant:
This study is intended to study experiences of ministers during the first five years of ministry following graduation from seminary. Your participation in this study will help me to better understand what is happening during the first five years of a career. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in the study.

This is an invitation to participate in one 60-90 minute interview and completion of an information sheet. Data analysis will follow standard qualitative procedures and will be conducted by Michael Kitsko under the supervision of Dr. John Dirkx. Participants will choose pseudonyms prior to analysis, and all identifying information will be removed from transcripts prior to analysis.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time, with no penalty for doing so. You can choose not to participate at all, or not answer some or all of the questions. There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

The interviews will be audio recorded. If this is an issue, you can choose to not participate in the interview. If you agree that I may record the interview, you can request at any time that I turn off the recorder. Digital recordings will be kept in a secure location, password protected, until three years after this study is completed, at which time they will be erased.

The information form - on which you indicate your name, contact information, and chosen pseudonym - will be stored by the researchers in a secure, password protected location until three years after the end of the study, when it will be destroyed. The information form will be kept in a separate secure location than that of the digital recording.

Your identity will remain confidential in all transcribing, analyzing, and reporting of data. Because this study involves face-to-face interviews, I cannot provide anonymity to participants. However, your confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

I will use a pseudonym of your choice in transcribing, analyzing, and reporting data.

Please indicate on the information form if you would like me to provide you with a copy of the findings of the study, a bibliography of resources for further reading on the topic, or both. If you have any concerns or questions regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact the researcher: Michael Kitsko, (810) 287-6901, kitskomi@msu.edu, or my faculty member Dr. John Dirkx, Professor in Educational Administration, 429 Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, by phone: (517) 353-8927, or email: dirkx@msu.edu.
Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

_____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

APPENDIX C: Interview Protocol

Can you tell me a little about your background?

> Where did you grow up?

> What was your home life like?

What do you remember about the role of religion or faith while you were growing up?

When did you know you wanted to be a minister?

> How did you know?

Describe your seminary experience.

> What were classes like? Professors like? Other students like?

> What did you like/dislike about seminary?

> Nature of your preparation for your first five years?

What is it like to be a minister today?

> What do you like about it?

> What do you dislike about it?

Now I would like to focus more specifically on your current or recent experiences as a minister

Describe the interview process for your first post-seminary assignment.

> Explore interactions with pastor/board/DS prior to going

How did you know that first church was where you wanted to go?

> (If a person has left their first church, why did you decide to leave?)

> Describe how you made the decision to say yes to the church? Who was involved? How were they involved? (If other options were available, how did you decide between?)

Describe what was it like arriving at your first ministry assignment after seminary.

> (Explore the emotions)

Describe your first ministry context.

    What were your expectations?

    How you now feel about your early expectations?

How did you know when you were pastoring well?

    Describe some of the feedback.

    How was the feedback delivered?

How did you know when you were not pastoring well?

    Describe some of the feedback.

    How was the feedback made known to you?

Describe some your ministry highlights.

    Why do you consider these highs?

Describe some of your ministry challenges.

    Describe how seminary prepared you/didn't prepare you for the challenges?

What was the biggest challenge you faced?

Describe why you feel this was your biggest challenge?

    Who was involved?

    What was the nature of that challenge?

    How prepared did you feel about resolving that challenge?

Describe how you addressed the challenge.

    Why did you choose this way of addressing the challenge?

    What did you learn from the challenge?

    How would you address a similar challenge today?

How did the challenge make you feel about ministry?

Describe the kinds of support you experienced during your first five years.

What do you know, after five years, that you wish you knew when you started?

How did you come to know this now?

What do you wish someone would have told you early on in your ministry?

What would you go back and change in your early years of ministry (if you could)?

What one thing stands out for you about your first five years of ministry?

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