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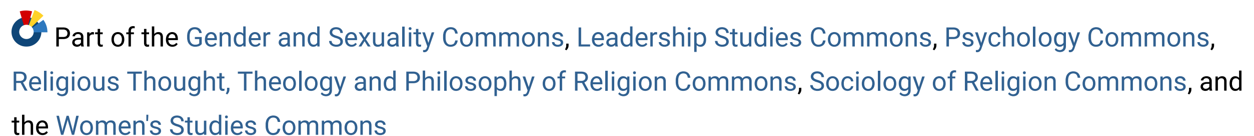
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FEMINIZED SERVANTHOOD, GENDERED SCAPEGOATING, AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GEN-X/MILLENNIAL PROTESTANT CLERGY WOMEN

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of

Graduate School of Leadership & Change

Antioch University

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

Lynn M. Horan

ORCID Scholar No. 0009-0007-6600-9525

September 2024

FEMINIZED SERVANTHOOD, GENDERED SCAPEGOATING,
AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GEN-X/MILLENNIAL PROTESTANT CLERGY WOMEN

This dissertation, by Lynn M. Horan, has
been approved by the committee members signed below
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of
Graduate School of Leadership & Change
Antioch University
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

FEMINIZED SERVANTHOOD, GENDERED SCAPEGOATING,
AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GEN-X/MILLENNIAL PROTESTANT CLERGY WOMEN

Lynn M. Horan

Graduate School of Leadership and Change

Yellow Springs, OH

In today's mainline Protestant churches, young women clergy navigate a precarious leadership space. While women's ordination is well-established in American Protestantism (Burnett, 2017), Gen-X/Millennial clergy women find themselves at the crosshairs of conflicting gender narratives and unsustainable expectations of what it means to be both a woman and an ordained pastoral leader. Through the use of feminist constructivist grounded theory methodology, this study explored the lived experiences of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women who have left active ministry or a specific pastoral position due to concerns over their own interpersonal boundaries and psychological safety. Through dimensional analysis of in-depth interviews with 20 clergy women representing eight mainline Protestant denominations, this study identified the co-core dimensions of *experiencing feminized servanthood as dehumanizing* and *experiencing feminized servanthood as abusive.* The social processes within these co-core dimensions severely compromised the clergy women's physical and psychological safety and informed their decisions to leave their respective ministry contexts. Extending from these co-core dimensions were five primary dimensions: (1) *developing a sense of call;* (2) *differentiating self from system;* (3) *exposing vs. protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems;* (4) *nail in the coffin;* and (5) *reconstituting self.* As a result of these findings, this study presents five theoretical propositions that address (1) the shadow side of servant leadership in the context of feminized servanthood; (2) reclaiming Gen-X/Millennial women's leadership strengths; (3) perceptions of

self-differentiated women leaders as a "dissident daughter" and an "emasculating disruptor"; (4) gendered scapegoating and the disappearance of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women; and (5) reconstituting self beyond "reckoning" and "resilience." This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (https://aura.antioch.edu) and OhioLINK ETD center (https://etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: feminist constructivist grounded theory, women and leadership, women clergy, psychological safety, executive derailment, mimetic theory, scapegoating, boundaries, mother-daughter wound, toxic masculinity, servant-leadership

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge several important people who supported this research in meaningful and life-giving ways. To my dissertation chair and methodologist, Dr. Harriet Schwartz, you have been a comforting and grounding presence throughout this entire process as I transitioned out of ordained ministry and reclaimed my identity as a feminist scholar practitioner. Thank you for your heart for relational teaching, your steady assurance at each step of the way, and your personal encouragement of this work. To my dissertation committee member Dr. Lemuel Watson, thank you for the depth of your guidance and your trauma-informed approach to leadership. To my dissertation committee member, Dr. Martha Reineke, thank you for enriching my understandings of mimetic theory and embodied perception and for validating this work through your insightful feminist critical scholarship. To my research mentor Dr. Sarah-Jane Page, thank you for providing a trustworthy compass for this research journey with your groundbreaking work on women clergy and gender-based violence. It has been such an honor to work with each of you and my research is a reflection of the encouragement and expertise you have graciously shared with me.

This research would not have been possible without the courageous clergy women and gifted pastoral leaders who participated in this study. Included in this community are the 20 women who were interviewed as part of this dissertation study as well as the 15 women who participated in an earlier pilot study that I conducted on clergy women psychological safety. Thank you all for trusting me with your experiences of religious trauma and psychological abuse that informed your decisions to leave toxic ministry settings, as well as sharing your brilliant leadership, deep emotional intelligence, and unapologetic decision-making, which has blazed a path for others who are facing similar realities. Your words hold power and proclaim the need

for concrete change. Surrounding this group of women is a growing community of clergy women who are transitioning out of dehumanizing ministry contexts. Thank you for supporting and amplifying this work as you pursue your own paths of healing and recovery. For all the clergy women who have journeyed with me, thank you for validating this work through your own lived experiences and for your willingness to share the outcomes of this research with those who are looking for a way out. I also offer gratitude to my long-standing spiritual director, Dr. Keli Rugenstein, who has journeyed with me as a seminary student, ordained clergy, and now as a doctoral researcher. Thank you for offering a space of safety, comfort, and peace.

My friends and colleagues at Antioch University's Graduate School of Leadership and Change have been a beloved community and family throughout this process, particularly as I parted ways with a professional and religious community that no longer reflected my process of self-development. Thank you for your compassion, your humor, your fierce engagement with difficult questions and social realities, your tender support of my spiritual journey, and your lasting friendship that will endure well beyond our time together in this program. I specifically want to thank my coding team members, Dr. Rachel Roberts and Dr. Susan Cloninger, who rallied around this work in such uplifting and encouraging ways and whose important scholarship on gender and leadership was a guiding light. I also want to thank my dear friends Emily Aiken, Alicia Wargo, Jessica Warrior, and Lesa Clark, who were my lifelines during moments of heartbreak and healing as I engaged in this research.

Acknowledgement and gratitude do not begin to express the depth of love I feel for my family, who have held my hand throughout this pilgrimage. To my husband, Vince, thank you for carving out space for me to dedicate myself to this research during quite possibly the most busy and unpredictable season in our lives as partners and parents. To my children, Margot,

Chantal, and Vincent, you have given this work more meaning than you will ever know. Margot, I'm so happy that you saw the joy and beauty in the work that I did as a pastor and that you've cultivated your own love of ritual in ways that will serve you well on your spiritual path. Chantal, you show me what is means to live life outside of the molds presented to us, and your fiery spirit inspires me to live more fully into who I was meant to be. Vincent, your very existence reflects that new life can emerge out of pain, and your consistent mid-morning naps were a gift that enabled me to engage in this work while caring for you at home. To my parents, who stepped in during key moments of this research to support our family. And to my dearest friends, who have known me when, then, and now, thank you for always seeing the fullness of who I am as my life evolves, and for honoring this work and all that it means. To those who I have not named, but who have shown genuine love, care, and interest in this work, I thank you.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Study and Research Question

In today's mainline Protestant churches, young women clergy navigate a precarious leadership space. While women's ordination is well-established in American Protestantism (Burnett, 2017), expectations of pastoral servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 2002), coupled with engrained gendered expectations of the self-sacrificial woman (Greene & Robbins, 2015; Page, 2016) continue to present significant challenges for young women clergy in both senior and associate-level positions (Campbell-Reed, 2019). Regardless of how prophetic the preaching and compassionate the pastoral care, or how effective one is as a church administrator or community builder, today's women clergy find themselves at the crosshairs of conflicting perspectives of what it means to be a pastor, leader, and a woman.

Pastor-parishioner conflict is an ever-present reality for Protestant clergy due to the high levels of boundary permeability within congregational church culture and restricted clerical authority in Protestant church governance. However, there is a distinct phenomenon known as "clergy killing," in which congregational conflict escalates and clergy are effectively driven out by a small group of disaffected parishioners and complicit denominational leaders (Rediger, 1997). In the wake of these relational dynamics, faith communities are left in a haze of confusion and blame, with clergy themselves feeling betrayed by the religious institutions they once loved and trusted. Within non-religious professional contexts, similar dynamics are known as "executive derailment" (Bono et al., 2017), "push-to-leave forces" (Dwivedi et al., 2023, p. 1263), and the "glass cliff" phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007), which involve conflicting gender expectations and others' negative perceptions of women in leadership that compromise the psychological safety of women leaders and ultimately motivate their exists.

While church-based scholarship has explored the phenomena of “clergy killing” without attending to the role of gender (Maynard, 2010; Rediger, 1997) and more recent business management literature addresses the gendered elements of executive derailment (Bono et al., 2017), there is a need to integrate these two paths of inquiry and explore the gendered social dynamics that impact the executive derailment of young clergy women and their subsequent decisions to leave active ministry.

My focus on gender identity and gender role expectations within the context of pastoral leadership necessitates a preliminary discussion on the use of gendered terminology and the choices I’ve made around the term “clergy women.” A primary limitation of this research relates to language, both the distinction between the terms “female clergy” and “women clergy,” as well as an overemphasis on the gender binary between men and women. I have prioritized the term “clergy women” or “women clergy,” as it appropriately denotes a socially constructed gender identity that is lived out in diverse ways based on one’s own embodied experience. There are times when I apply the term “female” in order to offer adjectival variation, but it is important to note that “female” refers to a more fixed category of biological sex as opposed to the social identity of one’s experience as a “woman” (Lakoff, 2004). While I prefer the term “clergy women,” participants in this research used both “female clergy” and “clergy woman” to describe their experiences, which I’ve maintained in their interview transcripts. In determining the most appropriate language, I recognize the inherent subordination of the terms “clergy woman” or “women’s pastoral leadership,” as clergy men are afforded simply the identity of clergy or pastoral leader. The use of the term “clergy woman” is a firm departure from such pejorative terms as “pastor lady” or “lady pastor,” which continue to be used in more culturally conservative religious contexts (Lakoff, 2004, p. 52). However, I recognize that “clergy woman”

continues to perpetuate binary understandings of gender, which will be addressed further in the section outlining Merleau-Ponty's theoretical framework of embodied perception. As a feminist researcher, my understanding of gender difference in the context of leadership reflects Jonsen et al. (2010), who posit that leaders are not significantly different based on gender; however, people believe they are different and these stereotypes create barriers to women's advancement (p. 556). Further discussion of my feminist epistemology will be included in a later section on feminist critical theory and researcher positionality.

In addition to my deliberate choices regarding the use of gendered language, as a White race-critical researcher, I was also intentional about my use of racialized language throughout this study. Written and spoken vocabulary used to describe an individual's racial identity and thoughts and actions around racial justice is limited, and is often misunderstood (Kendi, 2019). Racialized language can have a variety of meanings, depending on the author(s) purpose and positionality, the reader's interpretation, and one's lived racialized experience. In order to acknowledge the collective and cultural identities connected to race within this study, I chose to capitalize any word or group of words representing a racial group, including Black, White, Black clergy women, White clergy women, Women of Color, and People of Color (Baker-Bell, 2020). Throughout this study I sought to recruit a racially diverse group of research participants, including Black, Latina, and Asian-American clergy women, with the understanding that each of these racialized groups experience marginalization within American Protestant church culture in distinct ways (Mosley-Monts, 2022). Despite my desire to include diverse racial identities, I was only able to recruit White and Black clergy women for this study. Further discussion on recruitment strategies that promoted racial diversity in this study will be discussed in Chapter III.

In addition, Chapter V will discuss the need for further research on the lived experiences of clergy Women of Color.

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the experiences of Gen-X/Millennial Protestant clergy women who have left active ministry because they felt that their interpersonal and professional boundaries were violated and/or their physical or psychological safety was threatened. Through a feminist constructivist grounded theory study, I sought to identify the underlying social processes between mainline Protestant clergy, parishioners, and church governance structures that contribute to the decisions of young clergy women to leave their ministry contexts. Grounded theory is a rigorous qualitative research method that grounds theory within the data (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Later shifts in epistemology and postmodern understandings of the sociology of knowledge production have led to the development of more constructivist approaches, including feminist constructivist grounded theory, which informs my methodological approach to this study (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, Clarke, 2005, 2021). I define feminist constructivism as an approach to grounded theory methodology that is critically interested in “potentially contributing to emancipatory transformation,” particularly as it relates to socially constructed understandings of gender (Kushner & Marrow, 2003, p. 37). I will elaborate more fully on my choice of feminist constructivist grounded theory methodology in Chapter III.

In this study, I focused on clergy women’ concerns over their own interpersonal boundaries and psychological safety, and the ways in which those lived experiences informed their decisions to leave active ministry. This kind of departure is in contrast to those clergy whose resignation decisions are due to more benign reasons such as geographic location, new job opportunities, individual or family preferences, or retirement. The participants in this study are

those who experienced an expedited or "forced" resignation, having felt compelled to leave at a time not of one's own choosing (Dowding et al., 2012, p. 115). Leadership literature in corporate and business sectors have described this kind of departure with such terms as "push-to-leave forces" (Dwivedi et al., 2023), "executive or managerial derailment" (Bono et al., 2017), and the "glass cliff" phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). However, these forms of forced resignation and rapid turnover have not been explored with regard to women clergy in mainline American Protestantism, where there is an established history of women's ordination.

The topic of women clergy executive derailment was pursued through a feminist constructivist grounded theory study that explores the question: What is the experience of Gen-X/Millennial Protestant clergy women who have left active ministry because they felt that their interpersonal and professional boundaries were violated and/or their physical or psychological safety was threatened? The following discussion will break down this research question into separate components, revealing specific gaps in research and why each element is relevant within current leadership scholarship. Further theoretical background related to these topical areas will be outlined in Chapter II.

Social Context and Gaps in Research

Mainline American Protestantism

The social context of this study was mainline American Protestantism, where women's ordination is well-established within formal church polity and generally accepted at the local congregational level. Despite the long-standing history and employment practices that externally support women's pastoral leadership, there are internal and subconscious relational processes that deeply question and/or complicate the role of women's pastoral leadership. Such tacit social dynamics are in contrast to the more overt discriminatory behavior and denominational policy

within conservative religious institutions that resist or reject efforts to ordain and employ women clergy (Rocca, 2023). Formal recognition of women's ordination within mainline American Protestantism dates back to 1956 with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), followed by similar denominations accepting women's ordination (Hunter, 2016). This is in contrast to the Anglican tradition in England, where women's ordination was approved more recently in 1992 and where churches are allowed to formally "opt out" of allowing women priests to lead their congregations (Page, 2016; Roberts, 2016). It is this long-standing institutional acceptance of women's ordination within mainline American Protestantism that serves as the backdrop for uncovering the more insidious and unspoken elements of gender bias and conflicting gender-identity narratives that impact clergy women boundaries, psychological safety, and decisions to leave active ministry.

Mainline American Protestantism includes denominations with historical roots in the European Reformation of the sixteenth century and its widespread protest of state-sponsored Catholicism. In response to the abuses of Catholic clerical authority, Reformed or Protestant traditions developed around the central features of representative church governance, reduced clerical authority, and non-literal interpretation of biblical text. Today's mainline Protestant denominations include the United Methodist Church (UMC), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Presbyterian Church (PC-USA), Episcopal Church, American Baptist Church (ABC-USA), United Church of Christ (UCC), and Christian Church Disciples of Christ (DOC) (Burnett, 2017). Another common feature of mainline American Protestantism is its rigorous ordination process, which includes extensive seminary education in biblical exegesis, liberal theological philosophy, community pastoral practice, and denominational polity, followed by clinical chaplaincy training, a professional psychological evaluation, and an extensive approval

process by regionally elected denominational leaders. This intensive path of academic study and professional preparation is in contrast the spiritualist traditions of Evangelical, Pentecostal, and certain Baptist traditions, as well as nondenominational churches, where ordination standards are less stringent and are more spiritually driven and locally validated (Zikmund et al., 1998).

Mainline American Protestant denominations have further distinguished themselves through the formal approval of women's ordination and the full or partial implementation of denominational policies that are supportive of reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, inclusion of LGBTQ+ lay persons and clergy (Smith, 2015), as well as intentional work in areas of racial, economic, and environmental justice. These more progressive and change-oriented branches of Western Christianity have seen a significant rise in women seminary graduates and ordained women clergy serving in senior and solo pastor positions (Burnett, 2017). This increased representation is in contrast to conservative Protestant traditions such as the Southern Baptist Convention and nondenominational Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, where women's ordination is rejected within formal church polity and local congregational practice (Rocca, 2023). By exploring mainline American Protestantism, where women's ordination is well-established, this study identified the complex social processes and conflicting gender-identity narratives that affect the psychological safety of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women and their decisions to leave active ministry.

Women Clergy

Women's pastoral leadership is not a new phenomenon within Christianity. From the intimate home-based churches of first-century Palestine (Torjesen, 1993) to the formal ordination of women clergy in twentieth century mainline Protestantism (Hunter, 2016), women's religious leadership has been exhibited throughout the history of Christianity. However, as will be further

outlined in the following literature review, Christian communities have often absorbed surrounding patriarchal social norms, resulting in an historically fraught relationship with the female body and women's leadership that continues to be exhibited today within contemporary Christianity (Van Wijk-Bos, 2022). Despite historical efforts to suppress women's leadership in various branches of Christianity, women clergy in American Protestantism represent a growing proportion of both seminary graduates and actively serving ordained clergy. Women clergy account for a third of seminary students, the highest percentage in history (Miller, 2013), with fully credentialed women clergy rising from below 10% in 1977 to between 20% and 40% in 2017, depending on the denomination (Campbell-Reed, 2019, p. 33). Despite these significant advancements, barriers to the full acceptance of women clergy continue to exist within mainline Protestantism, where only 10% of senior and solo pastor positions are held by women (Barna, 2019).

The lack of gender parity among American Protestant clergy creates a context of heightened visibility (O'Neill, 2018) as well as social conflict related to gender role congruency (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Young women clergy who are employed in senior and solo pastor roles are oftentimes the first or second woman to hold such a position in the congregation's leadership history. While this reality of otherness can carry a certain appeal or novelty, such initial acceptance is often based on essentialist understandings of women leaders. To essentialize means to characterize a quality or trait as fundamental or intrinsic to a particular type of person or thing. Women can be essentialized as more relational or amenable leaders who are particularly adept at managing or absorbing conflict (Marrone, 2018; Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). While congregations may initially respond with great acceptance and enthusiasm toward a woman clergy, parishioners may eventually perceive particular qualities or approaches of women's

pastoral leadership to be in conflict with established gender norms and preferred notions of "mainline masculinity" (Bendroth, 2022, p. 98). This places young clergy women in a "double-bind" (Tanner, 2016), where they are expected to perform their gender through binary notions of feminized relationality, which some may criticize as soft or ineffective leadership. At the same time, when clergy women adopt a more assertive or agentic approach to leadership, their approach may be considered incongruent with gender role expectations of compliance and agreeability. Tanner (2016) outlines this "double bind" in a helpful way by noting the persistent binary qualities that continue to be applied to gender roles and leadership:

> A double bind means you must obey two commands, but anything you do to fulfill one violates the other. While the requirements of a good leader and a good man are similar, the requirements of a good leader and a good woman are mutually exclusive. A good leader must be tough, but a good woman must not be. A good woman must be self-deprecating, but a good leader must not be.

There is significant scholarship on the heightened visibility of women leaders within predominantly male-centered leadership contexts, which often results in conflicting perceptions of women leaders in terms of gender bias (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016), gender role congruency (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and alterity (O'Neill, 2018). Despite the prevalence of related research in corporate and business sectors, there is a need for constructivist qualitative research that explores the ways in which women clergy negotiate conflicting gender expectations and perceptions of their leadership. Previous qualitative research has focused on religious spaces where women's pastoral leadership is restricted or not well-established, including early generations of ordained women clergy in American Protestantism (Burnett, 2017; Zikmund et al., 1998) and current generations of Anglican women priests where women's ordination is more recent and therefore less socially accepted (Page, 2016; Roberts, 2016). This study fills in this gap by exploring the experiences of young women clergy as they negotiate their own interpersonal boundaries and

psychological safety within American Protestantism, where women's ordination is more widely accepted.

Generation-X/Millennial Women Clergy

There are specific elements of gender and age alterity that supported this study's demographic focus on Gen-X/Millennial women clergy. The following discussion outlines the justification for this age criteria, including the younger ordination age of today's women clergy coupled with intergenerational realities within predominantly Baby Boomer congregations. Generation X is defined as those born between 1965 and 1980 (ages 44 to 59 in 2024) and Millennial is defined as those born between 1981 and 1996 (ages 28 to 43 in 2024*)*. This study also focused on older parishioners and denominational leaders in the Baby Boomer generation, which is defined as those born between 1946 and 1964 (ages 60 to 78 in 2024; Beresford, 2024).

Alongside the increased representation of women as seminarians and fully ordained clergy (Campbell-Reed, 2019; Miller, 2013), the latest generation of women clergy are entering seminary and securing senior-level pastoral leadership positions at a younger age than previous generations of women clergy (Page, 2016). The average age of women's ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is 40.6 years, which is slightly older than the average age of male ordination at 37.5 years. In the United States, both Protestant clergy men and women are significantly younger than their Anglican counterparts, whose average age of ordination in 2018 has held steady at 50 years of age (Hope, 2018). Therefore, Gen-X/Millennial women clergy include those women who are younger than average, having been ordained in their twenties and early thirties, as well as those who may have been ordained in their thirties and early forties and are relatively new to the ministry. Millennial women clergy are the youngest generation of women clergy to assume high-level pastoral leadership positions in mainline Protestantism, with

some securing senior and solo pastor positions directly out of seminary in their late twenties and early thirties. This is in contrast to previous generations of clergy women who typically underwent seminary training and ordination later in life, often after raising children and/or as a second career (Burnett, 2017; Page, 2016). Despite the growing representation of women clergy, only 10% of senior and solo pastor positions are held by women. This percentage drops significantly by age, with senior-level women clergy under the age of 45 years considered extremely rare (Barna, 2019).

Due to their younger ordination age and quicker ascension to senior leadership positions, today's young women clergy are introducing new realities to the pastoral role. Gen-X/Millennial clergy, regardless of gender, are promoting alternative ministry models to the corporate and capitalistic models of parish ministry that were prevalent in previous generations of male-centered pastoral leadership. Such economic-centered approaches have prioritized programmatic productivity that favor key stakeholders within the church system, while younger Protestant clergy are increasingly interested in a broader ecosystem that decentralizes leadership and collaborates with marginalized communities outside of the church (Rohrer, 2020). In addition to changes in leadership philosophy and practice, young women clergy also present new familial realities, which older congregants may not have encountered with previous pastors. For example, Gen-X/Millennial clergy women are often the first pastors in their congregation's history to introduce and negotiate maternity leave policies (Page, 2016). In addition, today's young clergy women are often part of a bi-vocational nuclear family, with full-time working spouses or partners who are not necessarily engaged in parish culture. This is in contrast to previous generations of male-centered pastoral leadership, where clergy wives were highly involved in uncompensated church leadership (Frame & Shehan, 2004; Roberts, 2016). Therefore, the

intersectionality of age and gender for Gen-X/Millennial women clergy present new social dynamics and potential conflict between clergy, parishioners, and denominational leaders.

The use of the term "intersectionality" is intentional as it situates both sexism and ageism as intersecting systems of oppression effecting Gen-X/Millennial clergy women. Other aspects of intersectionality including race and sexual orientation will be discussed further in Chapter IV. While Crenshaw's (1989) original conceptualization of intersectionality pointed specifically to the multi-layered aspects of racial and gender identity, she later argued that intersectionality can be applied more broadly to any identity in which there are overlapping systems of oppression including socio-economics, sexual orientation, disability, and occupation (Columbia, 2017). My understanding of intersectionality draws upon Crenshaw's later view as well as Walker's (2019) description of individuals carrying "many cultures in one body," with the emotional and political salience of each depending on the context in which we find ourselves (p. 13). This embodied understanding of intersectionality focuses on the lived experience of the individual, rather than an external arbiter determining what constitutes a legitimate or weighty enough layer of identity to be considered a site of systemic oppression. While some may question whether age is a valid intersectional identity, this study revealed systemic gendered infantilization whereby parishioners and denominational leaders attributed childlike qualities to Gen-X/Millennial women clergy, even those well into their forties, in order to silence, marginalize, and/or discredit their leadership. There is a tendency for understandings of intersectionality to reflect assumptions of privilege, causing certain forms of discrimination to be left unacknowledged or minimized. Crenshaw (1989) illustrated this through the analogy of a traffic accident at an intersection, in which harm can be caused from multiple directions, which at times may be unintelligent to the observer depending on their vantage point (p. 149). Therefore, I seek to

present a multi-layered understanding of intersectionality that includes not only sexism and racism, but ageism and ableism, which may not be as readily observable or justifiable to those in positions of privilege.

The focus on specifically Gen-X/Millennial clergy is also significant, as this age range is roughly one generation younger than women in the Baby Boomer generation, who represent the largest demographic of mainline Protestant parishioners (Public Religion, 2020). This particular intergenerational alignment has the potential to mirror a mother-daughter relationship, which is further magnified by the intimate and familial nature of Protestant parish culture. Conflicting gender-identity narratives between these two generations of women may reflect significant generational asymmetry in terms of personal agency and social mobility (Hasseldine, 2017). While conflict between women in the workplace (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Marrone, 2018; Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007) has gained attention within gender and leadership scholarship in business and corporate sectors, exploration of intergenerational relational dynamics between women has yet to be explored within the context of Protestant church culture where it is perhaps even more pervasive due to current denominational demographics. This study explored the intersectionality of age and gender of young women clergy as they responded to violations of their interpersonal boundaries and threats to their psychological safety, which has not been addressed in extant research on gender and leadership.

Decisions to Leave Active Ministry

Despite the growing proportion of women graduates from Protestant seminaries (Hunter, 2016) and the increased presence of women clergy serving in solo/senior pastor leadership positions (Campbell-Reed, 2019), there has been a significant increase in early and mid-career attrition. Recent poll data collected by the Barna Group, a California-based research firm that

studies faith and culture, revealed that 38% of Protestant senior pastors surveyed have considered leaving the ministry during 2020–2021. Among pastors under age 45, that number rose to 46%, with young women clergy showing the highest levels of attrition (Florer-Bixler, 2021). Some have quickly assumed that the flight of women clergy during the past few years has been largely due to pandemic-related social pressures, including work-life balance, childcare considerations, and the ongoing strain of absorbing the heightened anxiety of churchgoers as they navigated various stages of the pandemic (Gross, 2022). However, these explanations offer an overly simplistic view and fail to address systemic issues within Protestant church culture and denominational governance that cause women clergy to leave active ministry amid intense congregational conflict. Leadership literature focusing on corporate and business sectors has identified several relevant dynamics including "push-to-leave forces" (Dwivedi et al., 2023), "executive or managerial derailment" (Bono et al., 2017), and the "glass cliff" phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). These dynamics point to conflicting gender expectations and perceptions of women in leadership, which ultimately compromise the psychological safety of women leaders and motivate their exits. However, these forms of high-pressure resignations and rapid turnover have not been explored with regard to women clergy in mainline American Protestantism where there is an established history of women's ordination.

Boundaries and Psychological Safety

While there is a growing body of feminist constructivist research on gendered leadership boundaries and psychological safety (Diehl & Dzubinkski, 2016; Diehl et al., 2020; Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007), there is very little qualitative research in this area that focuses specifically on the experiences of younger clergy women. There has been increased research on the personal costs and emotional burnout associated with women's pastoral leadership, particularly among

Anglican women priests where women's ordination is less established (McKinney, 2022; Myers, 2020; Page, 2016; Roberts, 2016) as well as extensive analysis on the challenges of the first generations of American Protestant women clergy (Burnett, 2017; Zikmund et al., 1998). However, no current research has applied a feminist critical approach to explore the social processes that contribute to the violation of women clergy boundaries and psychological safety in American Protestantism where women's ordination is generally accepted. As a result, I sought to address gaps in theoretical understandings of gender and leadership boundaries, particularly as it relates to young women clergy as they negotiate conflicting gender-identity narratives and the resulting impact on their interpersonal boundaries and psychological safety.

Summary

Through this study, I explored the lived experiences of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women within American Protestantism who have left active ministry because they felt that their interpersonal and professional boundaries were violated and/or their physical or psychological safety was threatened. By exploring this specific social phenomenon, I sought to address current gaps in research in the following areas: (1) conduct qualitative research on women clergy within American Protestantism where women's ordination is widely accepted as opposed to extant research on women priests in England where women's ordination is more recent and, in some cases, still institutionally prohibited; (2) focus on Gen-X/Millennial women clergy in order to identify unique intergenerational tensions within parish culture that have not yet been explored in qualitative research on women clergy; (3) explore the social processes that lead to the executive derailment of women leaders, which has not yet been applied to young clergy women who have left active ministry; and (4) conduct feminist constructivist research on interpersonal boundaries and psychological safety of women leaders that goes beyond preliminary examinations of coping

mechanisms and essentialist understandings of women's relationality. The gaps in research identified in each of these theoretical areas will be discussed further in Chapter II.

Positionality and Research Stance

My interest in researching women clergy leadership boundaries and psychological safety stems from my previous vocation as an ordained Presbyterian clergy, with prior professional experience in legislative politics, family counseling, and domestic violence prevention. Following my early career in women's healthcare policy, my feminist commitments drew me to more grassroots women's advocacy efforts. This led me to work alongside indigenous health care promoters in southern Mexico as well as developing a movement therapy program for survivors of sexual abuse in central Peru. These experiences of embodied transformation and recovery brought me back to my roots in upstate New York, where I engaged in cross-cultural strength-based counseling at a transitional housing program for homeless women and children. As a trained dancer and yoga practitioner, I bring an intentional somatic element to my work, particularly as it relates to trauma recovery among women survivors of abuse (Menakem, 2017; Van der Kolk, 2014). In addition to this embodied and trauma-informed approach, my passion for promoting women's agency has always had a spiritual component, based on my core belief in our intrinsic human value and purpose. It was this humanist and theological thread that drew me to ordained parish ministry, building on my somewhat peripheral upbringing within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In 2014, I became an ordained Presbyterian minister embarking on a professional path that seemed to meld my passions for social justice, healing ritual, and my desire to journey with others in a deeply relational way.

My identity as a White, middle-class, cis-gender, heterosexual woman has enabled me to move within each of these leadership contexts with relative ease. While much of my career has

involved caregiving and intentional relationship-building, often essentialized as more female-oriented skill sets (Eagly & Karau, 2002), it wasn't until I entered the historically male-centered leadership context of mainline Protestantism (Bendroth, 2022; Campbell-Reed, 2019; Zikmund et al., 1998) that expectations of the female caregiving role became unsustainable. For 10 years, I served as the first woman solo pastor and head of staff of two Presbyterian congregations, with my last parish having a history of 260 years of exclusively male pastoral leadership. In order to avoid the emotional burnout and intense compassion fatigue associated with pastoral leadership (Frame & Shehan, 2004; Myers, 2020; Page, 2016), I established intentional boundaries around my physical body, my availability, and my professional role, which were embraced by some and rejected by others.

After leaving active ministry and beginning my doctoral studies in 2021, I found a grieving yet resilient community of ex-clergy willing and eager to share their experiences. Through their raw and vital testimonies, I began to see the flight of women clergy not as an individual tragedy to be dealt with behind closed doors, or an unfortunate mix of clashing personalities, but a systemic issue leaving young women clergy silenced and shamed. While I was aware of the phenomenon of "clergy killing" (Rediger, 1997) and the prevalence of toxic congregational dynamics (Maynard, 2010), I became increasingly curious and concerned why this phenomenon is so widespread, why now, and why these women? This study was driven by my deep commitment to shed light on women's experiences, particularly in spaces where their stories are minimized and silenced. Moreover, it is my hope that in looking more closely at the social dynamics between today's young women Protestant clergy and their congregations, new theory will emerge that is applicable to non-religious spaces as it relates to leadership boundaries and the psychological safety of women leaders.

My positionality as an ordained Presbyterian clergy situates me as both an insider and outsider (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) within this study's social context of mainline Protestant congregational life. As a woman clergy who has left active ministry due to observations of toxic workplace behavior (Kusy & Holloway, 2009), I could identify with some of the experiences of the research participants. However, I also had an outsider status, as my affiliation with specific congregations and organizational structures within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) did not directly mirror the experiences of other Presbyterian clergy or those from other mainline Protestant denominations. My status as no longer being in active ministry also distanced me from the experiences shared by participants who had been more recently engaged in congregational ministry. Additional reflection on my background in pastoral ministry as it relates to this research will be included in Chapter III's examination of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

As a White researcher committed to race-critical feminist scholarship, I have reflected deeply on the importance of including the experiences of clergy women with different racial identities in this study. Therefore, throughout this study I sought to recruit a racially diverse group of research participants, including Black, Latina, and Asian-American clergy women, with the understanding that each of these racialized groups experience marginalization within American Protestant church culture in distinct ways (Mosley-Monts, 2022). After completing a pilot study with thirteen White clergy women, I shared the findings with three Black clergy women colleagues who had expressed interest in this research. Each shared elements of their own experiences and that of their colleagues, which alerted me to important concerns regarding the personal boundaries and psychological safety of clergy Women of Color within their ministry contexts. I discussed with each of my colleagues the implications of my identity as a White

researcher, understanding the potential vulnerability of both White and Black clergy women who have experienced psychological abuse and trauma within ordained church leadership. Following these conversations, I considered whether my positionality as a White researcher previously employed within a predominantly White Protestant denomination would be problematic in terms of building trust and credibility among Black clergy women. My concern was based on the fact that White American Protestantism has historically been a racially oppressive institution, which continues to be seen in the highly segregated nature of Christianity in the United State (Boles, 2020). I was also mindful of the potential for this research to reinforce the historical appropriation of the experiences of Black women by White feminist researchers (Christoffersen & Emejulu, 2023). Having identified these concerns in conversation with other race-critical scholars, I continued to feel the importance of including clergy Women of Color, while also recognizing the potential recruitment challenges based on my positionality. While I was unable to recruit Latina and Asian-American clergy women, I am extremely grateful for the Black clergy women who participated in this study, particularly considering the concerns noted above. Chapter III will include further details on my intentional recruitment of clergy Women of Color, as well as my commitment to promote race-critical feminist research. Chapter V will also include discussions on intersectionality and the need for further research on the lived experiences of clergy Women of Color and nonbinary clergy.

My positionality also includes a feminist epistemology, which informs my research question, the areas I've explored in my review of literature, my choice in methodology and research methods, and the framework through which I interpreted the resulting data. My understanding of feminism is based on the premise that gender identities, roles, and hierarchies are socially constructed in ways that can harm, limit, scrutinize and/or devalue individuals and

groups (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lakoff, 2004). My feminist standpoint includes an intersectional approach that "embraces the complexities of compoundedness" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 166) and is conscious of the ways in which multiple points of identity interact with gender-based oppression (Lightsey, 2015). As a feminist leadership theorist, I promote the foundational feminist position that the personal/private is political/public (Hanisch, 1970) and seek to problematize the gendered construction of leadership boundaries in private and public domains as well as religious and non-religious contexts. Finally, as a feminist epistemologist, I seek to highlight the sociology of knowledge production and engage in social science research that resists sexist or androcentric methodological choices and interpretations (Longino, 2017). As a result, my choice of methodology and study design was grounded in my commitment to knowledge advancement that is human-centered, egalitarian, and liberative (Kushner & Marrow, 2003).

As I've unpacked the layers of my own personal and professional identity, I have reconnected with my feminist roots, with greater awareness of the need for feminist research particularly in the areas of leadership and social change. Advancements in gender equity and access to positions of leadership, particularly in the Global North during the past century, have caused some to take on a post-feminist view, which assumes that certain sectors of society have overcome gender-based oppression (Nast, 1992). Others maintain a "gender-blind" view that disregards any distinctions between gender (Jonsen et al., 2010, p. 556). In contrast with these points of view, my feminist standpoint recognizes the ongoing struggle for gender equality, particularly with regard to the lived experiences of women leaders and acknowledges the ways in which engrained gender narratives continue to restrict and oppress individuals and groups in their day-to-day private and public lives. The following section outlines the foundational aspects

of feminist critical theory, which guided my research on clergy women psychological safety and decisions to leave active ministry.

Feminist Critical Theory

This study was framed within a feminist critical lens in order to address issues of power, voice, and identity that may not be sufficiently addressed in the relevant scholarship. In particular, I was interested in the ways in which the literature addressed embodied perception and the gendered construction of leadership boundaries. The use of feminist critical theory as a methodological approach to critique current literature offers both opportunities and challenges. An important opportunity is the tendency for scholarship to minimize or overlook gender with the assumption that society is generally now post-feminist (Nast, 1992). Becker (2000) noted that the silencing of gender construction is evident in current scholarship on sociology and religion, where strong feminist critiques have become diluted by approaches that "favor a consensual and functional, or even communitarian interpretation of a good society" (p. 406). Becker challenged this post-feminist assumption that the goals of feminism as a social movement have been largely achieved, and maintained that feminist theory is a theoretic lens that still applies to social science research, a position with which I strongly agree.

Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska (2013) identified a distinct disciplinary disconnection between secular and religious feminisms, based on a sacred/secular divide, evident through different stages of feminist history as well as the sacred/secular binary apparent in academic scholarship (p. 244). Different epistemologies exist whereby sociologists of religion and religion-family literature may veer away from overt feminist critique as it "devalues women's own lived experiences of religion as meaningful" (Becker, 2000, p. 400). Conversely, sociologists who study human development with often explicit feminist commitments might

ignore discussions of religion with the assumption that “any religious influence on family life is harmful to women” (p. 404). As a result of these theoretical and epistemological differences and resulting silences, there is a need for more explicit feminist critical theory along the intersections of gender, leadership, sociology, and religion. These fields are often explored in separate silos, with religion being perceived as an exclusively private domain, sociology hovering between private and public, and leadership placed firmly in the public sphere. Through this study, I sought to bridge the existing divides in scholarship on gender, religion, sociology, and leadership through qualitative research on the psychological safety of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women, which can be applied to non-religious sectors where rigid gender narratives continue to negatively impact women leaders.

While feminist critical theory offers an important lens to assess the gendered construction of boundaries as it relates to women clergy and women’s leadership in general, the use of feminist critical theory has its limitations. Nagy Hesse-Biber (2014) noted the challenge of using feminist theory alongside more androcentric research methods such as survey and quantitative data analysis, which may insufficiently capture the lived experiences of women research participants. On the other hand, to label all critical feminist theory research as strictly qualitative in nature minimizes the extent to which quantitative research can effectively apply critical feminist theory. Similarly, Gannon and Davies (2014) pointed out the propensity of critical feminist theory to reinforce binary thinking. Researchers may oversimplify their comparison of literature and identify research in an either/or, man/woman, or his/her manner that essentializes binary gender identities and avoids more nuanced discussions of intersectionality and overlapping marginalized identities.

In order to address these limitations, the application of anti-racist feminisms, postmodernist approaches, and womanist scholarship can offer important safeguards against the essentialization and exclusion of certain identities in the evaluation of research. Liu (2020) argued the importance of applying a more pluralistic approach of anti-racist feminisms. This constructivist approach is based on the understanding that "the intersectional nature of our social relations means we are embedded in various and shifting locations along these cross-cut hierarchies and at any one point in time experience different forms of both oppression and privilege" (p. 104). Such intersectional approaches problematize what Schulz et al. (2018) described as WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) orientations to social theory, which need to be continually addressed if feminist theory is to effectively promote de-colonizing frameworks of social change. Additionally, Nagy Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2014) described the importance of reflexivity within feminist research, whereby researchers assess how their own theoretical positions and biographies shape their research topics and methods. Finally, womanist scholarship and its application of gender and race criticism alongside liberative theological and spiritual frameworks, offers an expansive approach to gender criticism that is highly deconstructive with its commitment to avoid essentialism across gender and racial identities (Lightsey, 2015). I applied these intersectional and decolonizing approaches within my own critical feminist lens as I assessed the current literature on embodied leadership, gendered boundaries, and the lived experiences of Protestant women clergy.

This study explored the lived experiences of women clergy, with gender being a distinct factor in the selection of participants and analysis of their experiences. Within this context, I applied the work of Jonsen et al. (2010) and their research on gender differences in leadership. The research outlined three distinct paradigms regarding gender and leadership, with each

holding its own unique assumptions and implications. The three paradigms included: (1) the gender-blind view, in which leaders are not significantly different and should therefore be treated the same, regardless of gender; (2) the gender-conscious view in which leaders are significantly different and should be treated accordingly based on their gender identity; and (3) the perception-creates-reality view in which leaders are not significantly different based on gender, however people believe they are different and these stereotypes create barriers to women's advancement (p. 556). While these three perspectives may be oversimplified and perpetuate binary-categories of gender identity, they do speak to the various ways in which women's pastoral leadership might be viewed by both pastors and parishioners, with resulting implications for each. In light of my own feminist epistemology, I promoted the third paradigm of "perception-creates-reality," which is reinforced by Merleau-Ponty's (1945) theorizing around embodied perception, further outlined in Chapter II. Additional discussion on feminist critical theory will also be included in the overview of methodology and study design in Chapter III.

Research Methodology and Design

Having established the feminist epistemology that informed this study, I chose to apply feminist constructivist grounded theory methodology to explore the lived experiences of clergy women boundaries and psychological safety and resulting decisions to leave active ministry. The usefulness of constructivist grounded theory for this study is reinforced by Holloway and Schwartz (2018) who noted the strong applicability of grounded theory within research on equity, diversity, and inclusion:

> Grounded theory has the potential to uncover the elusive qualities of the workplace, take the researcher beyond hegemonic understandings of organizations, hold as central the participants and their stories, portray complex interactions, include an intersectional stance and make visible the role of silence; all elements that situate grounded theory as a viable and powerful method for EDI research. (p. 497)

Researchers who use grounded theory methodology must be cognizant of the influence of their own assumptions, personal theory, and practice wisdom, in order to prioritize the meaning-making processes of the research participant. Scott (1990) referred to practice wisdom as “incipient induction,” which involves “lengthy exposure to similar situations through which unconscious associations are established between certain features of cases” (p. 565). My own practice wisdom, outlined in my positionality statement, was then coupled with received theory that I acquired through the critical review of literature outlined in Chapter II. Based on these areas of prior knowledge, my exploration of women clergy boundaries and psychological safety took into account (1) my own leadership experience as an ordained clergy and related professional background in women’s advocacy; and (2) received theory based on my critical review of literature on the social context of women clergy in American Protestantism, embodied leadership and perception, and the gendered construction of leadership boundaries. As Charmaz (2014) noted, the researcher’s background, assumptions, and disciplinary perspectives can increase the researcher’s awareness of certain possibilities and processes in their data. However, the researcher must also “be willing to revise or relinquish [them], should their interpretations of the data so indicate” (p. 30). Therefore, while my own prior knowledge and disciplinary background enabled me to identify certain sensitizing concepts, which will be outlined in Chapter II, in order to uphold the integrity of grounded theory methodology, such personal and received theories remained in the background while undergoing data collection, in order to center the voice and perspectives of the research participants. Additional trustworthiness measures and ethical considerations will be outlined in Chapter III.

Feminist constructivist grounded theory methodology was a useful choice for this study as I explored the lived experiences of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women who have left active

ministry because they felt that their interpersonal and professional boundaries were violated and/or their physical or psychological safety was threatened. Grounded theory methodology provided the foundation for this study and guided all decisions made throughout the process of data collection and interpretation. Chapter III will include more detailed descriptions of my feminist epistemology, its application to constructivist grounded theory methodology, and the ways in which this research approach was implemented in this study.

Outline of Dissertation Chapters

This dissertation contains five chapters, each mutually informing each other in an effort to understand the experiences of women clergy who have left active ministry because they felt that their interpersonal and professional boundaries were violated and/or their physical or psychological safety was threatened. Chapters I to III outline the relevant literature and grounded theory methodology, while Chapters IV and V present the data analysis, research findings, and emergent mid-range theory, as well as implications for future research and leadership practice.

- **Chapter I.** This chapter includes an overview of the study and its rationale, including a thorough overview of my feminist epistemological stance and researcher positionality.
- **Chapter II.** This chapter provides a comprehensive review of relevant literature and sensitizing concepts through a feminist critical lens. Thematic areas include women clergy and American Protestantism, embodied leadership and perception, and leadership boundaries and psychological safety.
- **Chapter III.** This chapter outlines the methodology and research design, including background and rationale for the use of feminist constructivist grounded theory as

well as measures to ensure trustworthiness throughout the study. This chapter also includes ethical considerations necessary for qualitative research and safeguards to ensure the well-being and autonomy of research participants.

- **Chapter IV.** This chapter includes the extensive findings from this study, including the dimensional analysis and explanatory matrix that was used to analyze the data.
- **Chapter V.** The final chapter of this dissertation includes discussion of the findings and the resulting theoretical model. Also included in this chapter are implications for future research and leadership practice, scope of the study, and researcher reflections as a scholar practitioner.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following literature review situates this study within three core areas including (1) the history and social context of women clergy within American Protestantism; (2) embodied leadership and perception; and (3) leadership boundaries and psychological safety. Each of these areas was further analyzed through a feminist critical lens, which highlighted the ways in which the social construction of gender impacts the application of each theoretical area to the lived experiences of women clergy. Within each topic, I highlighted several sensitizing concepts that informed this study's exploration of the psychological safety of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women and their decisions to leave active ministry. By unfolding this theoretical landscape, I identified further gaps in research that justified my exploration of the research question: What is the experience of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women who have left active ministry because they felt that their interpersonal and professional boundaries were violated and/or their physical or psychological safety was threatened?

Based on my use of constructivist grounded theory methodology, the purpose of this literature review differs from other research methodologies. Rather than present a firm theoretical stance related to the research topic, the literature review within a grounded theory study presents sensitizing concepts and background knowledge that inform the researcher's understanding of the topic. In addition, sensitizing concepts underscore the researcher's particular epistemology and research stance, as constructivist grounded theory acknowledges that researchers have prior knowledge and practice wisdom that inform their topic of exploration (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, this literature review is not a determinative causal explanation but is instead an overview of the social context and relevant theoretical landscape of the relationship between women clergy psychological safety and decisions to leave active ministry.

Women Clergy in Mainline American Protestantism

The following discussion provides an overview of the social context of women clergy in mainline American Protestantism. There is widespread scholarship on the various shifts in the socio-political landscape of Western Christianity and its impact of women's religious leadership. Within this discussion, I have chosen to highlight the two bookends of early third-century Christianity and contemporary twentieth-century Christianity, to illustrate how surrounding social narratives have influenced the subjugation of women's religious leadership. I seek to demonstrate that the roots of early Christian theology were not inherently misogynistic but were initially grounded in liberative beliefs and practices. The following discussion outlines the historical transition of early Christianity from a localized egalitarian social movement in first-century Palestine to a state-sponsored religion mirroring the strict gender roles of third-century Greco-Roman culture, which continues to influence gender role expectations within Western Christianity (Torjesen, 1993; Van Wijk-Bos, 2002). Following this historical overview is an analysis of mainline Protestant polity, relational practice, and the pastoral role, with particular emphasis on the reduced clerical authority of pastoral leaders and high boundary permeability within congregational life. Finally, the discussion on Protestant women clergy today problematizes the under-representation and heightened visibility of women clergy and the lack of constructivist qualitative research on women clergy boundaries in American Protestantism where women's ordination is well-established.

Subordination of Women's Leadership in Western Christianity

While it is worthwhile to focus on more recent factors in the evolution of women's ordination in American Protestantism, it is also important to highlight the liberative social dynamics present within early Christianity. My intention in highlighting this earlier historical

period is to question certain assumptions that Christian theology and belief is inherently misogynistic, as reflected in more socially conservative expressions of contemporary Christianity practice (Rocca, 2023). Despite the well-recorded history of the harmful impact of Western Christian imperialism, Christian theology and social practice were historically rooted in a relatively egalitarian expression of faith (Torjesen, 1993). The early first-century church emerged out of a socially conscious, liberation-oriented movement within first-century Palestine, known simply as "the Way." Led by a Jewish carpenter and spiritual teacher, the Jesus movement humanized the experiences of women, racial minorities, those with chronic illness, and other marginalized individuals who experienced systemic oppression. The Jesus movement offered a "radical egalitarianism" that resisted the political violence of the Roman empire and social dominance of prevailing religious law (Torjesen, 1993, p. 158). In addition to the more altruistic leadership practices exhibited by the Jesus movement in the early first century, a particular embodied theology emerged following Jesus' death, which parallels other indigenous worldviews and non-Christian understandings of incarnational spirituality. Not unique to Christianity, incarnational spirituality is a collective belief that the divine or sacred is not a detached and distant reality, but is manifested in our own embodied experiences (Sukdaven, 2018). Acknowledging the egalitarian roots and embodied spirituality and leadership practices of early Christianity, problematizes the later development and institutionalization of patriarchal and misogynistic beliefs and practices of contemporary Christianity (Bendroth, 2022; Shoop, 2010; Van Wijk-Bos, 2022) which continue to impact the lived experiences of today's ordained women clergy (Burnett, 2017; Campbell-Reed, 2019; Zikmund et al., 1998).

Christianity's historically fraught relationship with gender, sexuality, and the female body, has its roots in the third-century shift away from the embodied leadership models and

highly egalitarian practices of the early church toward a formal state-sponsored religion mirroring the highly restricted gender roles of secular Greco-Roman culture. In her research on women's leadership in the early Christian church, Torjesen (1993) outlined the transition from the social egalitarianism of "the Way," practiced in predominantly women-led localized home churches, to more public and hierarchical spaces of leadership that mirrored the male-dominated *polis* or public assembly of secular Greco-Roman culture. This socio-political shift also saw the expansion of secular Greco-Roman attitudes toward women and sexuality that influenced the Greek philosophy of the self, in which "the lower part of the self was characterized as female, sexual, and dangerous" (p. ix). The strict gender dichotomy that took root within the rise of Christianity as a state-sponsored religion was further reinforced by biblical interpretations and harmful theologies centered around fear, shame, and isolation of the female body.

Feminist biblical scholar Van Wijk-Bos (2022) noted that while the suspicion and distrust around women's leadership "took root in the classical periods, it took on new shape and function in modernity" (p. 99). Openness to change may occur in the first stages of social formation, such as increased gender equity during the first-century Jesus movement. However, Van Wijk-Boss demonstrated that "transgressive impulses" are often quickly opposed in order to maintain well-established cultural norms (p. 100). Despite the modernization of Christian belief and practice and the increasing presence of women clergy in the twentieth century, restrictive social practices and harmful theologies with regard to prescribed gender roles have created significant barriers to the leadership development of women clergy, even within more progressive Protestant denominations.

Mainline Protestant Polity and Relational Practice

Within Western Christianity, mainline American Protestantism is the predominant tradition to formally support and enact women's ordination (Bendroth, 2022; Burnett, 2017; Zikmund et al., 1998). Within this established history of women's ordination, gender bias presents itself in highly tacit and unconscious ways, as compared to more conservative Christian traditions that explicitly reject women's pastoral leadership (Campbell-Reed, 2019). The denominations of mainline American Protestantism include United Methodist Church (UMC), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Presbyterian Church (PC-USA), Episcopal Church, American Baptist Church (ABC-USA), United Church of Christ (UCC), and Christian Church Disciples of Christ (DOC; Burnett, 2017). The general progressivism of these denominations is largely due to their historical commitment to democratic governance, reduced clerical authority, rigorous scholarly inquiry, and non-literal interpretation of biblical text (Zikmund et al., 1998). Such openness to social change through collective decision-making has resulted in important denominational policies related to gender equality, beginning with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s acceptance of women's ordination in 1956 (Hunter, 2016), followed by more recent policies affirming the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy (Youngs, 2011) and same-sex marriage (Smith, 2015), with variations in specific language and degree of local congregational acceptance depending on the denomination. This political liberalization both within and beyond Protestant religious life, as well as other historical, economic, and socio-political factors, created a pathway of formally promoting women's ordination.

Despite these advancements and historical commitments to political liberalism, mainline American Protestantism is highly characterized by patriarchal, bureaucratic, and male-centered leadership models, which present significant barriers to the full expression of women's pastoral

leadership (Bendroth, 2022; Campbell-Reed, 2019; Rohrer, 2020). In addition, the high value placed on intellectual and cognitive knowing within mainline Protestantism has resulted in a distinctly disembodied religious tradition. As Shoop (2010) pointed out, the discussion of and incorporation of embodied experience into Christian belief and practice is often limited to lessons on self-control and moderation. She described the "Protestant problem" in which "our bodies have been seen as a liability, a conspirator in our fallenness. . . . We live in a Christian community with only a thin layer of understanding of our own embodied capacity to experience redemption" (pp. 2, 11). The lack of inclusion and acceptance of the physical body has resulted in theological teachings and faith practices that fail to embrace the fullness of the human experience, particularly as it relates to oppressive beliefs and practices with regard to race, sexuality, and gender. Even as progressive Protestant clergy and congregations seek to distance themselves from the colonial and patriarchal history of Western institutionalized Christianity, the imprint of male-centered Cartesian leadership models and practices continue to pervade Protestant Christian culture (Van Wijk-Bos, 2022). Further discussion and definitions regarding embodied experience will be included in the following discussion on Merleau-Ponty's (1945) philosophy of embodied perception.

A primary feature of mainline Protestantism is its representational church governance, which is intended to provide checks and balances on ecclesial power and promote collective decision-making processes. Within mainline Protestant denominations, local congregational administrative power rests within a small council, session, or vestry, comprised of elected parishioners, with oversight by regional bodies, which include volunteer lay church leaders and ordained clergy with rotating term limits (Gray & Tucker, 2022). Figure 2.1 illustrates the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s structural organization, which is reflective of other mainline

Protestant denominations (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Appendix A). This four-tiered structure is helpful for understanding various levels of decision-making, particularly at the regional Presbytery level, which oversees congregational conflict mediation, pastoral employment contracts, and clergy severance negotiation procedures. Based on local power dynamics, regional church governance bodies exhibit varying degrees of effectiveness when it comes to advocacy pathways for clergy within conflictual or toxic work environments (Kusy & Holloway, 2009). This polity structure also illustrates the reduced authority and positional power of ordained clergy, which was recently illustrated by the PC(U.S.A.)'s experimental decision to give clergy the alternative title of "teaching elder," in order to reduce perceived power differentials between pastor and parishioner (Johnson, 2012).

Figure 2.1

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Governance Structure

Used with permission by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Based on the collective decision-making approaches and limited clerical authority within Protestant church governance, today's Protestant clergy are trained to be extremely competent at systems-level thinking in order to enhance productive conflict resolution (Gray & Tucker, 2022). However, local and regional church governance is often stifled by ineffective decision-making methods that involve either binary opposition or oversimplified uniformity as opposed to allowances for diverse and complex perspectives. The emergence of integrative polarity work in organizational and adaptive leadership (Donnelly, 2020) is an important counterweight to the more dualistic decision-making within Protestant congregational life. Protestant clergy are becoming increasingly adept at this form of conflict resolution thanks to more practical seminary training and shifts in generational approaches (Rohrer, 2020). Donnelly (2020) defined integrative polarity work as a pathway to "navigate perceived oppositions and polarities both personally and collectively, so as not to fall into a simplistic either/other approach (p. 498). This more postmodernist approach of nonbinary thinking is especially important within organizational contexts such as Protestant parish culture, where previous patterns of decision-making are deteriorating without new approaches firmly established. Integrative polarity work is especially important within the work of regional Committees on Ministry (COM), which oversee pastor contracts, mediate between pastors and congregations in high-conflict situations, and, when necessary, oversee pastoral termination and severance negotiations. However, rather than serve as a professionally trained local human resources branch of the denomination, regional COMs are notoriously ineffective in mediating conflictual congregations and pastor-parishioner conflict. Clergy who have served in leadership roles on regional COMs, have noted that they are a revolving door of volunteer members with little to no human resources or employment policy

experience, which jeopardizes important conversations and decisions regarding pastoral advocacy (K. Stenta, personal communication, May 15, 2021).

An overarching challenge for today's younger clergy, in particular women clergy, is the clash between innovative pastoral leadership that embraces integrative polarity work (Donnelly, 2020; Keating, 2013) and the more binary decision-making practices of industrial CEO-style models of leadership, which continue to pervade within "inherited churches" (Rohrer, 2020, p. 28). Rohrer describes inherited churches as having deeply intrenched "institutional habits" that resemble capitalist business structures whereby the pastor is seen as a CEO hired to satisfy shareholder interests within the congregation. As Rohrer observed, "In that schema, we end up with a church that is for the smallest possible constituency, a pastor who cannot possibly please everyone, and an external, broader church and world that are not considered or engaged at all" (p. 28). Rohrer noted that this model of economically driven leadership is grounded in male-centered individualistic leadership practices, which reinforces the notion of "mainline masculinity" within American Protestantism (Bendroth, 2022, p. 98). These established structures have a significant impact on the acceptance of young clergy women who exhibit more inclusive and collaborative leadership approaches.

Having established key elements of Protestant organizational structure, the following discussion will focus on the pastor-parishioner relationship. The pastoral role defies categories, with multiple layers of identity that elicit both positive and negative perceptions among parishioners, peripheral churchgoers, and those not engaged in religious practice. The various identities that contemporary clergy may hold include teacher, parent, caretaker, healer, counselor, spiritual adviser, administrator, staff supervisor, building and grounds keeper, activist, change agent, orator, and scholar, among others. The multi-faceted nature of the pastoral role has

mystified both non-religious and religiously inclined people, resulting in a broad range of sociological influences within contemporary culture (Weber, 1963, 2001). As clergy move between various roles and job responsibilities, at times seamlessly and at other times haphazardly, the identity of the individual pastor operates in a complicated way as pastor and parishioner negotiate role congruency (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and whether or not the pastor can satisfy the conscious or unconscious needs of the parishioner. Beyond the performativity of the clerical robe and positional power of the pulpit and sacramental rituals, parishioner perceptions of Protestant pastoral leadership identity can vary significantly.

Reiss (2015) argued that individuals participate in spiritual or faith-based communities, consciously or unconsciously, due to unmet human identity needs (Redekop, 2002), which an individual hopes the faith community and/or pastor can fulfill. A point of conflict emerges when the pastor's own identity becomes the site where conflicting psychological needs are negotiated. Reiss (2015) illustrated further that religion accommodates the values motivated by 16 basic desires of human nature, including power, independence, curiosity, acceptance, order, saving, honor, idealism, social contact, family, status, vengeance, romance, eating, physical activity and tranquility (p. 17). These desires can often be manifested in individuals with opposite personality traits, which further complicates pastor-parishioner relationships and congregational conflict.

A parishioner's understanding and acceptance of who the pastor is, both as a person and as a leader, are highly dependent on the particular needs, wants, and desires of the parishioner and the role the parishioner wants or needs the pastor to play in one's life (Redekop, 2002). If the perception of the pastor's personhood does not align with the role desired by the parishioner, there is a direct link to the parishioner's inability to trust, follow, accept and/or respect the pastor. This misalignment between parishioner expectations and the realities of the pastor's

particular identity, has led to the distinct phenomenon of "clergy killing" within Protestant church culture. "Clergy killing" is defined as escalating congregational conflict in which clergy are effectively driven out by a small group of disaffected parishioners and complicit denominational leaders (Rediger, 1997). Such efforts to remove a clergy from a pastoral leadership position reflect a similar dynamic in corporate and business sectors known as "push-to-leave forces" (Dwivedi et al., 2023, p. 1263), "executive derailment" (Bono et al., 2017), and the "glass cliff" phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). These dynamics point to conflicting gender expectations and perceptions of women in leadership, which ultimately compromise the psychological safety of women leaders and motivate their exists. This social process is further enabled within Protestant church culture due to the decentralized power structure of local congregations, reduced clerical authority, and lack of secular legal oversight due to church-state separation. The findings of this study provide an important bridge between the lack of gender-critical research on the phenomenon of "clergy-killing" and current theorizing on executive derailment and push-to-leave forces that effect the lived experiences of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women.

Protestant Clergy Women Today

The growing presence yet still under-representation of women clergy in mainline American Protestantism has dismantled some of Christianity's historical anxiety concerning the female body and women's leadership. However, continued gender role expectations and conflicting gender identity narratives, both overt and subtle, create significant barriers to the full expression and women's pastoral leadership as it relates to clergy boundaries and psychological safety. Women clergy account for a third of Protestant seminary students, the highest percentage in history (Miller, 2013), with fully credentialed women clergy rising from below 10% in 1977

to between 20% and 40% in 2017, depending on the denomination (Campbell-Reed, 2019, p. 33). Despite these significant advancements, barriers to the full acceptance of women's pastoral leadership continue to exist within mainline Protestantism, where only 10% of senior and solo pastor positions are held by women (Barna, 2019). A recent study of clergy attrition noted an alarming 46% of pastors under the age of 45 were considering quitting full-time ministry, with young women clergy showing the highest levels of attrition (Florer-Bixler, 2021). Some have quickly assumed that the flight of women clergy during the past few years has been largely due to pandemic-related social pressures, including work-life balance, childcare considerations, and the ongoing strain of absorbing the heightened anxiety of churchgoers as they navigated various stages of the pandemic (Gross, 2022). However, these explanations offer an overly simplistic view and fail to address the systemic issues within Protestant church culture and denominational governance that negatively affect women clergy.

Research on women clergy in American Protestantism expanded significantly in the 1990s and early 2000s due to the comprehensive study of Zikmund et al. (1998) and increased research funding from sources such as the Lilly Endowment, which explores religious and educational life in the United States. More recent research (Burnett, 2017; Campbell-Reed, 2019) has tracked the changing dynamics of women in ordained ministry as the first two generations of Protestant women clergy enter retirement and Gen-X/Millennial women clergy enter senior-level pastoral positions. Also influential in expanding scholarship on the lived experiences of women clergy was the inclusion of women clergy as ordained priests in the Church of England in 1992, which has brought important ethnographic and case study research from British and Australian leadership scholars studying the cross-section of gender, sociology and religion (Frame, 2004; Greene & Robbins, 2015; Myers, 2020; Page, 2016; Roberts, 2016).

Current research on women clergy draws from both post-positive and constructivist epistemologies, utilizing predominantly mixed methods such as large sample surveys (Zikmund et al., 1998), smaller sample narrative surveys (Frame & Shehan, 2004), and purposeful sample semi-structured interviews (Page, 2016). These studies have touched on various aspects of the lived experiences of women clergy, including pastoral identity (Roberts, 2016), vocational calling and work-family balance (Greene & Robbins, 2015; Page, 2016), and compassion fatigue and emotional burnout (Frame & Shehan, 2004; Myers, 2020). While research in these areas applies an increasingly feminist constructivist lens, earlier research methods have not sufficiently addressed overarching systems of oppression and instead have the tendency to place the onus on women clergy themselves to increase strategies of self-care and work-life balance. The current emphasis on individualized coping mechanisms for women leaders is also evident in research in parallel fields including counseling (Burke, 2022), collegiate student affairs (McKinney, 2022) and school superintendency (Polka et al., 2008). In addition to the limited focus on individual coping strategies for women clergy, current research also lacks attention to clergy boundary-setting that is beyond the work-family interface, such as expectations on leadership style, relationality, flexibility, compliance, and availability. Overall, current research on women clergy would benefit from further feminist constructivist approaches that explore the underlying social processes involved in the resistance and/or rejection of women clergy boundaries, specifically within American Protestant denominations where women's ordination is well-established. As a result of these gaps in research, this study explored the more tacit social dynamics and overarching systems of oppression that promote a culture whereby the interpersonal boundaries and psychological safety of young women clergy are severely compromised, informing their decisions to leave active ministry.

Greene and Robbins (2015) offered an important account of the experiences of women clergy ordained in the Church of England, which highlighted the particular stresses that women clergy endure within a largely male-dominated leadership context. In 1992, the ordination of women clergy was approved by the Church of England (CofE), nearly four decades after women's ordination was first approved in American Protestantism (Hunter, 2016). A year later, controversy over the vote within local CofE churches resulted in the denomination's decision to allow individual parishes to not employ ordained women pastors. This more recent history and overt pushback to the presence of women clergy created even higher levels of visibility and vulnerability for women clergy as compared to American Protestantism, where women's ordination is more firmly established (Hunter, 2016).

The increased alterity or otherness of women clergy has strong implications for what Greene and Robbins (2015) described as "sacrificial embrace," in which clergy, regardless of gender, override feelings of psychological stress due to a deep sense of vocational calling and purpose. While this dynamic is felt by clergy regardless of gender, the acceptance of such sacrifices has "particular and more difficult consequences for clergywomen within the gendered context of the CofE" (p. 408). One such consequence is the expectation that women clergy take on the additional role of a clergy spouse, a role historically taken on by a male clergy's wife. This expectation is similar within American Protestant congregations, where women clergy are often expected to occupy additional roles and job responsibilities previously held by a male pastor's wife. Greene and Robbins (2015) exposed a particular danger among women clergy who take on these additional supportive and/or sacrificial roles, beyond the already high expectations of job performance within the role of pastor. Existing gender expectations of female compliance, as well as parishioner resistance to the leadership role of women clergy, coupled with the

centrality of vocational commitment and "sacrificial embrace," place women clergy at risk of accepting unsustainable levels of harassment, boundary crossing, and unrealistic job requirements as compared to their male clergy counterparts.

American Protestantism has historically featured male-centered expressions of pastoral leadership that promote solo achievement and capitalistic stakeholder models of productivity. This has established unrealistic expectations of a pastor's constant availability and lack of boundaries around the pastoral role (Rohrer, 2020). The mythical notion and standard of a pastor's constant presence is further enabled by the expectation that a male pastor's spouse provide a supportive ministry role both in the church and at home, as noted above (Greene & Robbins, 2015). Such behind-the-scenes, unpaid spousal support has historically given male pastors more time, freedom, and availability to ensure the needs of the larger congregation. This expectation of unchecked availability has proven to be unsustainable and unhealthy for pastors, their families, and their congregations, resulting in important denominational policy changes including a 40-hour work week and requirements for paid vacation, continuing education, family leave and, most recently, maternity leave (Office of the General Assembly, 2021). However, despite more standardized professional contracts, unhealthy expectations of self-sacrifice for women clergy continue to exist, which are above and beyond the call of faith-based service within Protestant pastoral leadership (Greene & Robbins, 2015).

Due to the longer history and more widespread acceptance of women clergy within mainline American Protestantism, Gen-X/Millennial women who currently serve in senior and solo pastor positions have an ability to push back on certain gendered expectations in ways that previous generations of women clergy could not (Zikmund et al., 1998). However, an ongoing challenge amid the increased autonomy and self-advocacy among today's Protestant clergy

women is that there is no legal recourse for pastors whose intentional boundary-setting practices are rejected by parishioners. Due to the separation of church and state, ecclesial leaders, including Protestant clergy, are not afforded protection by anti-discrimination laws including England's Equality Act of 2021 (Greene & Robbins, 2015, p. 406) and the United States' Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This "ministerial exemption" (The Pew Forum, 2011) is based on the ecclesial status of ordained clergy, who are generally considered outside of the bounds of secular legal protection. This leaves women clergy with little to no legal recourse against such abuses as sexual misconduct, harassment, and unsafe work environments, thereby placing women clergy in a precarious and vulnerable leadership space. Such areas of conflict are discussed, if addressed at all, internally through denominational judicatory processes. The lack of legal recourse, coupled with ineffective denominational advocacy channels, lack of accountability within local congregations, as well as the vocational commitment that certain women clergy maintain amid such challenges (Greene & Robbins, 2015), create a dangerous dynamic whereby individual women clergy can be systematically silenced, psychologically abused, and traumatized by their experiences in parish ministry.

Page and McPhillips (2021) presented a thorough analysis of contemporary issues related to religion and gender violence, highlighting the ways in which church-state separation has enabled religious institutions to avoid the secular judicial system. As "semi-independent bodies," church culture has been able to avoid certain financial and legal responsibilities, although that has come under heightened scrutiny due to increased prosecution of abuses of the Catholic Church in the United States and Australia (p. 156). Page and McPhillips point out that the sacralization of the priesthood, particularly male religious leadership, in both large-scale Catholic contexts and high-cost religious movements such as Jehovah's Witnesses, serve to

protect male religious leaders and perpetuate systemic abuse. A gap in this research is an assessment of gender-based violence that occurs against women clergy within American Protestantism, where women's ordination is widely accepted, clerical authority is minimized, and local church governance is highly decentralized (Campbell-Reed, 2019; Rediger, 1997). Based on these contributing factors, women clergy are extremely vulnerable to gender bias, gender-based harassment, and psychological abuse as lay persons volley for local congregational power (Burnett, 2017).

Jagger's (2021) work on symbolic violence in the Church of English offered important foundational work in addressing the often obscured and unrecognized violence perpetuated against women in roles of religious leadership. Jagger argued:

> Internalized religious discourses that establish divinely appointed complementary gender characteristics, arranged hierarchically, produce conditions in which gendered violence can occur in hidden ways. . . . Put simply, at the symbolic level, interactions that rob women of subjectivity and agency—discursively or materially—is symbolic violence. (p. 4)

Jagger applied Bourdieu's (1991) framework of symbolic violence to illustrate that interpersonal domination is expressed through everyday language in ways that can appear as relational, supportive, and collegiate yet in reality "humiliate, silence, isolate and control" (Jagger, 2021, p. 7). For example, symbolic violence may be reflected in persistent comments on women pastor's physical appearance and/or sexuality, resistance to the appropriate use of maternity leave policies, judgement against women clergy who express emotion or demonstrate assertive leadership, and resentment toward women clergy who exhibit healthy boundaries around their pastoral role. While these exchanges may appear to be relatively civil encounters, beneath the surface are highly destructive disciplinary tools of shame and guilt (p. 5). Such symbolic violence is poorly recognized and understood in ecclesial and domestic settings, due to their

highly insular nature, which often prevents meaningful interventions. In order to make transparent the more hidden realities of psychological abuse against ordained women clergy, Jagger applied the Deluth Wheel of Power and Control (Pence & McDonnell, 1984). This diagnostic tool is a commonly used model by domestic abuse practitioners as it identifies behavior categories that constitute a violent relationship including intimidation, isolation, minimizing, blaming, and other forms of emotional and economic abuse. Jagger's ability to focus on both the public and private nature of religious and ecclesial culture reinforced a primary element of my own feminist epistemology and the importance of addressing the public vs. private dichotomy (Hanisch, 1970).

Current feminist constructivist research on the lived experiences of women clergy (Greene & Robbins, 2015; Jagger, 2021; Page, 2016; Page & McPhillips, 2021) provided a strong foundation for my exploration of women clergy who have left active ministry due to boundary violations and psychological safety. However, such research predominantly focused on the Anglican church, where women's ordination is considerably recent and continues to have strong pockets of institutional opposition. A significant gap in feminist constructivist research on women clergy is the more subconscious and tacit manifestations of gender-based violence within mainline American Protestantism, where women's ordination is more institutionally established. Such formal acceptance of women's ordination has caused some to minimize or deny that gender-based discrimination, boundary violations, and psychological abuse exist, as it relates to women clergy (Becker, 2000). Based on these gaps in current scholarship, this study offered much-needed feminist critical research on the psychological safety of Protestant clergy women in denominations where women's ordination in well-established.

Having established the social context of women clergy in American Protestantism, the remainder of this literature review will map out two key theoretical areas, including (1) embodied leadership and perception; and (2) leadership boundaries and psychological safety. Both of these areas will be further analyzed through a feminist critical lens, in order to address the social construction of gender identity and its impact on the lived experiences of women clergy.

Embodied Leadership and Perception

Overview

My desire to focus on the more tacit and insidious elements of gender bias and conflicting gender-identity narratives within mainline Protestant church culture brings to the forefront discussions of embodied leadership and perception. Embodied leadership is an emerging field of study that accounts for the interactions between sensing and perceiving bodies in the context of leadership. This area of scholarship has its roots in the phenomenology of embodied perception put forth by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) and the lesser known yet seminal work of Simone Weil (1959). The use of the term "body" throughout this discussion draws upon Merleau-Ponty's more nuanced understanding of the "body schema," which understands our embodied experiences as being "in-the-world" (Morris, 2012, p. 56). This is in contrast to Descartes' earlier philosophical standpoint, which asserted that the body is an object or biological machine, separate and distinct from human emotion and cognition. By replacing the terms "physical body" with "body schema," Merleau-Ponty acknowledged the body "not as a *special* object but as *not an object*" (p. 51). My understanding of the body firmly reflects Merleau-Ponty's de-objectification of the body, which is reflected in my use of the terms "somatic" or "embodied" experience throughout this study. However, at times I refer to the

"physical body" in order to reflect the in-vivo language and intensity of the physical harm described by the research participants. That being said, any further reference to the "body" in this study should be understood through Merleau-Ponty's lens of the "body schema" as a non-mechanical, non-objectified, psycho-somatic being.

Merleau-Ponty (1945) questioned the Cartesian emphasis on mental cognition as the primary way of existing in the world and outlined a more nuanced conception of consciousness focused on the lived body's role in perception. He asserted that our understandings of human relationships are primarily based on our perceptions of one another, and those perceptions are rooted in our embodied experiences. This "primacy of perception" involves the higher functions of consciousness, such as reflection and volition, which are grounded in the inter-subjective space of pre-reflective somatic existence (Ladkin, 2012, p. 3). Merleau-Ponty's ideas were developed further in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), an unfinished manuscript at the time of his sudden death in 1961. Together, these texts built a philosophy of embodied perception that moved beyond a merely sensorimotor level and provided the basis for understanding the ways in which we perceive and negotiate interpersonal boundaries (Leder, 1990).

While Merleau-Ponty successfully integrated his phenomenology of perception into an extensive volume that situated his work as the primary backdrop for embodied leadership scholarship, it is French philosopher and labor activist Simone Weil who first elaborated on embodied perception a decade before Merleau-Ponty. Despite Weil and Merleau-Ponty being contemporaries and graduating from the prestigious *École normale supérieure* in Paris within a year of each other, the outlooks of these two philosophers have rarely been placed in conversation with each other. Despite her earlier publications, Weil's writings have only recently been recognized as providing important groundwork for the development of embodied

philosophy (McCullough, 2012; Pirruccello, 2002). While Weil's work is presented in a less synthesized form, in part due to her short lifespan, her writings delve more deeply into the functionality of embodied perception through Weil's own embodied practices as a labor activist, as opposed to Merleau-Ponty's more theoretical approach. Further application of Weil's work on embodied perception will be included in the following section on leadership boundaries.

The combined works of Weil and Merleau-Ponty offer the theoretical and practical roots for scholarship on embodied leadership, with more recent developments focusing on the gendered aspects of embodied leadership though feminist critical and constructivist approaches. Starting in the 1980s, feminist discourse and its critique of the overly restricted female body began to emerge in the fields of psychology and pedagogy. However, such attention on the lived body has only recently entered discussions on leadership theory (Ladkin, 2012; O'Neill, 2018; Sinclair, 2005, 2012). Ladkin (2012) outlined this more recent trajectory in leadership studies, noting the shift away from "predominantly cognitively based accounts to those which recognize the emotional, affective, and aesthetic aspects of leadership" (p. 1). Sinclair (2005) noted that historically there has been a tendency for "bodies to disappear under the weight of theorizing" (p. 387), which has led to an overall lack of scholarship on embodied leadership until recently. Sinclair (2005) argued further that there has been a taboo around exploring the role of the body in leadership theorizing due to a prevailing male-normative understanding of leadership as a "bold, independent, agentic, and disembodied performance" (p. 390).

While scholars of embodied leadership may employ the terms "body," "bodily existence," or "gendered body," my application of their work continues to maintain Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as a phenomenological field or "lived body" (Morris, 2012). Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the "body schema" avoids essentialist understandings

of what a particular body should be, feel, or experience, as well rejecting a dualistic division between the mind and body (Daves, 2021). While this is consistent with my position as a feminist researcher, I am also aware of the ways in which certain social spaces, such as Protestant church culture, perpetuate highly prescribed gender narratives and rigid understandings of how female-bodied and male-bodied individuals should act, communicate, and lead (Shoop, 2010). With this tension in mind, I seek to incorporate both perspectives in which I acknowledge that Merleau-Ponty's original work does not focus on physical bodies. At same time, I apply embodied leadership scholarship (Ladkin, 2012; O'Neill, 2018; Sinclair, 2005), which discusses a physical, albeit de-objectified, body as a very present reality in leadership practice. As a feminist researcher applying embodied leadership scholarship to this study, I took Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological reality as a starting point to explore how rigid gender narratives are imposed on female-bodied individuals such as women clergy, even if the clergy women themselves do not hold those same gender narratives. I offer this explanation as I deeply value the contribution of Merleau-Ponty to the field of embodied leadership, yet I am also cognizant of the ways in which engrained gender narratives surrounding the female body within Protestant church culture influenced the physical and psychological safety of the women clergy in this study.

By acknowledging the tendency to minimize and avoid the lived body or attend to the visibility of only certain identities in leadership contexts, there has been a flourishing of scholarly inquiry surrounding the role of embodied leadership as it effects change across numerous fields, including business, health care, psychology, and religion. Referred to by Sheets-Johnstone (2009) as the "corporeal turn," the expanded scholarship around embodiment and the role it plays in learning, cognition, and perception is a "matter of not only attending to

something heretofore simply assumed and largely ignored, but of correcting something misrepresented for centuries" (p. 2). By addressing the Cartesian legacy that prioritizes the mind as the center of cognition, embodied leadership theory offers the opportunity to re-capture the centrality of Merleau-Ponty's (1945) "body schema" and embodied perception within leadership contexts and invites critical scholarship as it relates to intersectionality, in particular gender and race (Walker, 2019).

In her work on embodied leadership, Ladkin (2012) applied the work of Merleau-Ponty (1945) to assess the critical role that embodied perception plays in leader-follower relations, which has strong applicability to the experiences of women clergy in American Protestantism. Ladkin (2012) argued that the relational space between leader and follower is driven by perceptions, which "cannot occur without bodies to perceive and to be perceived," a central point within Merleau-Ponty's philosophy (p. 2). This understanding reinforces the notion that when followers perceive a leader, their perspective is based on the followers' own embodied experience, drawn from the follower's particular social location. The follower's embodied perception of the leader then develops into a particular somatic response. This process is often spoken about in terms of a "'gut feel' reaction and sensory response" and is the basis for our initial judgements about others, which is particularly important in our assessment of a leader's trustworthiness (p. 2). While such embodied responses can provide important and powerful knowing particularly with regard to feelings of safety, such perceptions can also lead to discriminatory and harmful assumptions, which can be easily overlooked by more rationally based accounts. It is this liminal space and often-subconscious nature of embodied perception where leader and follower relations are most readily enacted, with potentially damaging consequences for the interpersonal boundaries and psychological safety of women leaders.

The role of embodied perception is central to the ability for leaders and their followers to build confidence and trust in one another. This path of perception functions well when followers' perceptions of leaders are congruent with the leaders' own self-perception. However, the reversible nature of perception becomes fraught when it comes to a leader's alterity or "otherness," which has important implications for the psychological safety of minoritized leaders. In her work on women's embodied leadership, O'Neill (2018) observed the complicated reality that "as I perceive, I am also always being perceived" (p. 300). There is a precarious aspect to embodied perception that occurs when there is incongruence between the impression a leader intends to give and the resulting perception of the follower. The discrepancy can determine whether one's leadership is considered effective, meaningful, and appropriate versus ineffective and passive, or aggressive and threatening. Ladkin (2008) observed this disconnect between the impression that a leader "gives," which the leader is in control of, and the impression that a leader "gives off," which the viewer or follower interprets and is in control of (p. 38). Ladkin identified the critical importance of impression management as an embodied leadership practice, which involves keen awareness of the various embodied realities and perceptions of both the leader and follower. It is apparent that embodied leadership scholarship is particularly cognizant of the chasm that can exist between leader and follower perceptions, with feminist constructivist scholars offering further nuance as to the role of gender within leader-follower negotiations.

Gender and Embodied Leadership

The field of embodied leadership has revealed significant insights regarding the non-cognitive and pre-reflective ways in which leader-follower relations are enacted. However, only recently have these discussions included the role of gender, in particular the experience of

women leaders within traditionally male-centered leadership contexts. The following discussion explores the ways in which gender expectations function within embodied leadership practice and how understandings of gender affect the perceptive space between leaders and followers. O'Neill (2018) noted that current scholarship has drawn upon the work of Merleau-Ponty to "conceptualize the fundamental reversibility of embodied perception between the leader and the follower, but this analysis has not extended to the consideration of the sexed and gendered body" (p. 296). All lived bodies and the many identities that exist therein matter significantly in leadership. However, O'Neill clarified that the historical normativity of masculine leadership "bestows upon the male body the advantage of invisibility" (p. 297). O'Neill argued that women's bodies are not afforded the same sense of neutrality and are instead highly scrutinized. Lewis and Simpson (2010) observed that the privilege and "disembodied normatively" of the male body in leadership is precisely what allows the male body to go "unnoticed" (p. 5). Such observations reveal that understandings of the gendered body both create and perpetuate gender inequality and interpersonal power dynamics. While discussions on the gendered body is in tension with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment, the role of the gendered body is crucial to consider when exploring perceptions of women's leadership in predominantly male-centered leadership contexts such as mainline American Protestantism.

The importance of gender and gender role expectations in discussions on embodied leadership draws upon earlier observations in scholarship on authentic leadership. During the early 2000s, authentic leadership studies began to explore the ways in which gendered expectations influence the development of trust and confidence in leader-follower relationships, which has significant carryover into embodied leadership theory. Grounded in positive psychology, authentic leadership theories share two fundamental tenets: the concept of a 'true

self' and a connection with ethics and morality (Gardner et al., 2011). Liu et al. (2015) built on these tenets, yet pushed back on the notion that authenticity is an innate quality of being. Instead, Liu et al. argued that "authenticity is something leaders 'do' rather than something they 'have' or 'are'" (p. 237). This revised understanding of authentic leadership enabled new insights regarding the gendered construction of authentic leadership. As Liu et al. (2015) argued, the ability of an individual leader to be understood as authentic "depends on the leader performing authenticity in line with gender norms deemed appropriate for the socially constructed context in which they are expected to lead" (p. 237). These insights have resulted in an important shift within leadership scholarship whereby authenticity is no longer seen as attributional (Lawler & Ashman, 2012; Sinclair, 2013), in which leaders have certain internal capabilities that allow them to "do" authenticity. Instead, Liu et al. (2015) drew upon the concept of performativity to illustrate that the perceptions of a leader's authenticity are highly implicated in the leader's gender role conformity (pp. 238–239). By challenging the gender neutrality of authentic leadership, emerging scholarship on embodied leadership has been able to pay particular attention to the ways in which gender expectations are constructed and perpetuated, which has strong application to the gendered expectations and leadership boundaries of young women clergy.

Women Clergy and Embodied Leadership

Research on the embodied leadership of women clergy has emerged in England and Australia where women's ordination is more recent and, therefore, gender discrimination against women clergy is more overt (Roberts, 2016). In contrast, research on women clergy in mainline American Protestantism has not yet applied the more nuanced lens of embodied perception, perhaps due to the more established history of women's ordination and assumptions that

women's pastoral leadership is generally accepted (Burnett, 2017; Campbell-Reed, 2019). Roberts' (2016) autoethnography of the corporeal experiences and embodied leadership of an Anglican priest shed light on the unique pressures that female-bodied clergy encounter when ministering within predominantly male-centered leadership contexts. She applied Girard's (1966, 1977, 1986, 1987) mimetic theory to explain the dynamic whereby leaders within hierarchical institutions are often revered for their ability to provide a sense of safety, yet are at the same time an object of envy of the desires of the followers. When a social norm is challenged, as is the case with Anglican women priests and increasingly younger women clergy in American Protestantism, Roberts argues that "anxiety arises and the leader is replaced" (p. 81). Further application of Girard's mimetic theory and the scapegoating mechanism is included in Chapter V.

Elements of embodied perception are also included in Page's (2016) analysis of the unique burdens within the dual roles of Anglican priests who are also mothers of young children, highlighting the layered gender expectations of altruism and sacrifice. Additionally, Greene and Robbins (2015) problematized the "sacrificial embrace" imposed upon women clergy, which heightens the already sacrificial role of ordained clergy with additional gendered expectations of unsustainable female servanthood (p. 408). Such feminist constructivist scholarship is predominantly drawn from the Anglican context where women's ordination is less established and, as a result, gender bias and discrimination are more explicit. Within American Protestantism, where women's ordination is more firmly established, research has focused less on underlying social system dynamics and the embodied experiences of women clergy and more on recommended coping mechanisms for the daily stresses of ordained ministry (Zikmund et al., 1998), which will be discussed in the following section on boundaries and psychological safety.

Based on this review of embodied leadership scholarship, a primary gap in research is the connection between embodied perception and the functionality of interpersonal and professional boundaries. How are leaders' own boundaries perceived by others? In what ways does the reversible nature of perception cause leaders' boundaries to be deemed valid and therefore respected, or deemed invalid and therefore rejected by followers? Finally, from a critical feminist perspective, in what ways are our embodied perceptions of interpersonal boundaries gendered? Whose boundaries do we see as valid or invalid and who gets to decide? These questions will be explored further in the following review of literature on gendered leadership boundaries and psychological safety.

Leadership Boundaries and Psychological Safety

Overview

The discussion on embodied leadership and perception brings to the forefront the permeability of relational boundaries, which relates to my research focus on the psychological safety of Protestant women clergy. How are leaders' interpersonal and professional boundaries enacted, how are they perceived by others, and in what ways does gender impact the perceived validity of such boundaries? The review of literature in this area includes an overview of the evolution of the field of boundary work from team and team-leader boundaries to the gendered construction of leadership boundaries, with input from Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) and family systems theory. I will then identify limitations in the research, including tendencies to essentialize women leaders as ineffective at setting boundaries as well as the lack of feminist constructivist scholarship surrounding the gendered construction of leadership boundaries.

Scholarship on leadership boundaries emerged in the fields of counseling and psychology, with particular attention placed on the unique role that empathy plays in

practitioner-client relationships. Jordan et al. (1991) noted, “Without empathy, there is no intimacy, no real attainment of the paradox of separateness within connection" (p. 69). Moreover, Jordan et al. argued that a more nuanced understanding of empathy is needed for those who navigate highly porous leadership contexts such as clinical therapy, counseling, and pastoral ministry. Such practitioners must be highly skilled in maintaining their own self-differentiation, in which one is conscious of the delicate balance between one’s sameness and difference in relations to others. Self-differentiation involves identification with another’s emotional state, yet at the same time maintaining an awareness that “the source of the affect is in the other” (p. 69).

Cataldi (1993) built on this connection between relational separateness and connection, offering an important mapping of how boundaries function on an emotional and often subconscious level. She highlighted the importance of interpersonal boundaries through Merleau-Ponty’s notion of "lived distance,” which she described as “an emotional depth [or] sensitive space" and a spacial reality that both unites and separates. This observation highlights the precarious nature of interpersonal boundaries in which one being is "intermingled with but apart from something [someone] else" (p. 44). Cataldi argued further that it is equally problematic to be overly concerned with maintaining distance as it is to be wholly indifferent to one’s relational space, with emotional well-being requiring a balance between these two extremes. As one consciously observes “a place in which I am not” (p. 45), a leader holds space for close proximity yet maintains a healthy distance between self and other. This practice of self-differentiation is particularly important for clergy due to the high boundary permeability and familial nature of congregational life. The importance of self-differentiation and intentional

boundary-setting in Protestant pastoral practice will be discussed further in the section on Relational Cultural Theory.

The extent to which healthy and sustainable boundaries can be established between women clergy and their parishioners is a difficult endeavor due to what Merleau-Ponty (1945) described as the incompleteness of reversibility. Merleau-Ponty used a simple yet powerful metaphor of the circle of touching hands to illustrate the ever-present reality of our own boundedness and the incomplete nature of our own perceptive abilities, stating:

> When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of "touching" and "being touched." (p. 93)

The circle of one's own touching hands represents the lived body's capacity to occupy the position of both the perceiving subject and the object of another's perception. As Cataldi (1993) noted, this metaphor illustrates that "no reversible circle of perceptivity is entirely self-contained or entirely closed off from any other" (p. 71). Instead, the space between the person being perceived and the person perceiving overlap and mutually inform one another. The uncertainty of which hand is touching and which is being touched, reflects the ambiguity of our exchanges with other people. Furthermore, a critical aspect of Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis is that "reversibility is always incomplete" (p. 71). In other words, it is difficult to achieve a complete alignment between one's perception of another and the impression the other seeks to emit. Merleau-Ponty described this intersection between the perceiver and the perceived as a "chiasm," a term generally meaning "crossing," used in neuroanatomy and literary analysis (p. 75). This chiasm can be understood as a barrier or dark space that exists between two conflicting perceptions, a space that is particularly present in pastor-parishioner relationships. Due to the lack of research on the topic of pastor-parishioner boundaries and embodied perception, through

this study I explored the experiences of women clergy who have felt their own personal boundaries, or "lived distance" between pastor and parishioner, were violated or otherwise compromised.

Decades before Merleau-Ponty (1945) presented his phenomenology of embodied perception, Simone Weil (1959) pointed to the delicate nature of human boundaries through her understanding of friendship as a perilous balance between one's desire to consume and possess another, yet having the restraint to "look but not eat." Weil stated, "[Friendship] is a miracle by which a person consents to view from a certain distance, and without coming any nearer, the very being who is necessary to him as food" (p. 35). This relational image translates to the intimate nature of pastor-parishioner relationships in which parishioners exhibit varying degrees of restraint when it comes to respecting pastoral boundaries. Through this study, I sought to explore the social processes that cause parishioners to lose the restraint "to view from a certain distance" (p. 35), resulting in threats to the psychological safety and interpersonal boundaries of younger women clergy.

Important discussions on lived distance, interpersonal boundaries, and psychological safety have developed within leadership scholarship, particularly with regard to team-oriented contexts. However, there is limited research that addresses others' perceptions of women's leadership boundaries and their impact on the psychological safety of women leaders. Leadership scholarship on psychological safety began with a focus on work teams, where psychological safety was understood as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). Faraj and Yan (2009) added to this definition by noting that psychological safety is an "emergent state" in that it is "typically dynamic in nature and varies as a function of team context, inputs, processes, and outcomes" (p. 357). This understanding of the

ever-evolving nature of team boundaries is reinforced by Gunderson and Chocrane (2015) who defined boundary leadership as “the practice of leadership in the boundary zone, the space in between settled zones of authority, where relationships are more fluid, dynamic, and itinerant” (pp. 119–120). This is particularly salient within the context of Protestant church culture, where zones of authority are highly flexible and blurred, due to reduced clerical authority as well as institutional power held within small pockets of lay leaders who can shape a pastor’s reputation within the congregational social system (Maynard, 2010; Rediger, 1997).

Faraj and Yan (2009) explored the dynamics of team boundaries further by identifying three specific areas of boundary work including boundary spanning, buffering, and reinforcement (pp. 604–617). While boundary spanning is considered a “strategy of engagement,” boundary buffering involves an individual or group “closing itself off from exposure to the environment” in order to “protect itself against uncertainties and disturbances from without, thereby enhancing the possibility of rational action within” (p. 606). While boundary spanning and boundary buffering relate to the external functions of an individual or group, boundary reinforcement is a more inward-focused process, which has direct import to the exploration of the psychological safety of women clergy. This more internal work of boundary reinforcement is essential for maintaining individual leaders’ own psychological safety as they navigate various team settings, as it enables individual leaders to assess their own internal cues in order to re-establish equilibrium after boundaries have been pushed or compromised (p. 607).

Women Leaders and Psychological Safety

More recently, scholars have explored the psychological safety of individual women leaders, drawing on a larger body of research on gender bias as it relates to women in executive leadership positions. In historically male-centered leadership spaces, the perceived

incompatibility between women's cis-gender identities and executive leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002) has resulted in increased scrutiny and criticism of women executives compared to executive leaders who are men (Gupta et al., 2018). Dwivedi et al. (2023) revealed that women leaders are "chronically" and "acutely aware" of these disadvantages and, as a result, experience a sense of psychological threat within their leadership contexts (p. 1262). Similar to team psychological safety, individual psychological safety refers to one's belief that the workplace environment is safe for "interpersonal risk-taking" (Frazier et al., 2017, p. 114). Psychological safety allows employees "to feel safe at work in order to grow, learn, contribute, and perform effectively" in a demanding role (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 23). In addition, psychological safety enables an individual sense of trust, security, and relationship-building capacity within high stakes work environments (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Women leaders who have felt their psychological safety is compromised, described the feeling as a lack of belonging and a heightened perception of threat and interpersonal risk, resulting in "push-to-leave" forces that motivated their decisions to leave toxic work environments (Dwivedi et al., 2023, p. 1263). While the phenomenon of the executive derailment of women leaders (Bono et al., 2017; Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007) has been increasingly addressed in research within non-religious leadership contexts, there is currently no extant research on the psychological safety of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women and the ways in which push-to-leave forces (Dwivedi et al., 2023) influence their decisions to leave active ministry.

When reflecting on the heightened visibility and alterity of Protestant women clergy and its impact on women clergy psychological safety, there are important parallels to other historically male-centered leadership contexts. Watts (2010) offered relevant research on women as civil engineers within UK construction companies as "they negotiate their place as minority

workers in a masculine environment" (p. 175). Watts described a "visibility/vulnerability" spiral in which the "otherness" of women leaders in historically male-dominated contexts leads to increased criticism. Such increased scrutiny of women leaders creates "splitting and projecting responses that itself leads to closer surveillance" (p. 178). Watts noted further that wider cultural perceptions of women as the weaker sex are difficult to dislodge, even within sophisticated business environments where women are represented at all organization levels. Watts' assessment is particularly revealing for the context of women clergy in American Protestantism. Despite the expanded presence of women at all levels of denominational leadership, and the growing proportion of women seminarians and ordained clergy, there continues to exist local congregational beliefs, perceptions, and practices that question, resist, and ultimately reject certain expressions of women's pastoral authority (Campbell-Reed, 2019).

Current research on gender, psychological safety, and leadership boundaries can be found along a spectrum of both post-positivist and constructivist approaches. Post-positivist research on gender and leadership boundaries has taken a personal responsibility stance that focuses on individual strategies to combat compassion fatigue and emotional burnout (Frame, 2004; Greene & Robbins, 2015; Myers, 2020). Research in this area has emerged within specific caregiving professions including pastoral ministry (Greene & Robbins, 2015; Page, 2016), clinical therapy (Burke, 2022), and collegiate student affairs (McKinney, 2022). However, when addressing boundary regulation and psychological safety, such research places the onus on individual women leaders to establish more effective coping mechanisms to manage professional stress, such as increased self-care practices, individualized mentorship, counseling, or therapy. This interpretive lens ultimately feminizes workplace boundary violations and psychological safety as a dynamic for individual women to address within their own unique circumstances, rather than

critiquing the overarching gendered construction of leadership boundaries (Becker, 2020). In addition, research on the work-family interface and work-life balance (Ammons, 2013; Frame, 2004; Glavin et al., 2011; McKinney, 2022; Polka et al., 2008) has the tendency to essentialize women as more prone to stress, guilt, and overwhelm, due to gendered assumptions about women leaders' inability to establish and maintain boundaries. Such post-positivist approaches have not yet addressed the overarching gendered expectations of female self-sacrifice and boundarylessness, which significantly impacts the psychological safety of women leaders.

While post-positive research on gender and leadership boundaries has addressed individual coping strategies for women leaders, constructivist research has begun to unpack the larger systems of oppression that promote the gendered construction of boundaries and cultural expectations of female self-sacrifice, compliance, and accessibility. The use of feminist epistemology reveals overarching social structures and systemic gender oppression that resist and at times reject the interpersonal and professional boundary-setting of women leaders (Becker, 2020; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Marrone et al., 2018; Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Such research reveals a catch-22 dynamic in which women who allow more porous boundaries are valued, due to traditional gender-role congruency (Eagly & Karau, 2002), yet such boundary permeability ultimately leads to emotional and professional burnout. On the other hand, women leaders who maintain firm boundaries in order to preserve their own well-being and psychological safety are often ridiculed for being too rigid, assertive, or aggressive (Marrone et al., 2018). While the assessment of Marrone et al. is in tension with Merleau-Ponty's relational perspective and the permeability of interpersonal boundaries outlined by Cataldi (1993), their research reveals how certain institutions and professional work cultures expect women to be the sole agents for maintaining their own boundaries within environments where such boundaries are

systematically rejected. While the language of Marrone et al. echoes certain problematic elements of earlier positivist approaches to gender and leadership boundaries, their assessment of the double-bind expectation surrounding interpersonal boundaries is highly reflective of the experiences of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women.

Ellemers et al. (2012) commented on these opposing gender expectations by exploring two socio-gender convictions that affect women in leadership roles. On the one hand, women as a group are often expected to employ relational leadership styles, thereby adding diversity to management teams. On the other hand, individual women are expected to ascend to leadership positions by displaying the competitiveness and agentic leadership typically required from those in executive-level positions (p. 163). Ellemers et al. argued that both convictions stem from gendered leadership beliefs, both within organizational systems as well as the individual self-definitions of women leaders themselves. Social system beliefs about the ways in which men and women are likely to behave also carry strong normative overtones, dictating how we think leaders should ideally behave. As a result, behavior that deviates from gendered stereotypes is unexpected and tends to be devalued or otherwise socially sanctioned (p. 168). This is consistent with Eagly and Karau (2002) and Eagly (2005) and their work on gender-role congruency, particularly in contexts with historically male-centered leadership, such as mainline American Protestantism.

The “glass cliff” phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) highlights the potential for women leaders to be placed in precarious leadership positions due to organizational gender assumptions of female relationality. However, when the same woman leader emphasizes task-oriented and agentic leadership skills, often required within high conflict contexts, such perceived masculinized presentation sets the woman leader apart from other women in the organization. By

exhibiting gender-role incongruency, such women leaders are perceived by other women as undermining female group identity narratives, a phenomenon referred to as the "queen bee effect" (Ellemers et al., 2012, p. 183). An important conclusion drawn by Ellemers et al. is that the presence of women on the glass cliff "cannot simply be attributed to a failure of women to recognize the precariousness of such positions" (p. 176). To the contrary, women executive leaders are often extremely aware of the conflicting gender-identity narratives they must negotiate on a moment-by-moment basis, which continually compromises the psychological safety of women leaders. Ultimately, Ellemers et al. (2012) demonstrated how "glass cliff effects" may threaten the ability of women to be successful individually, while "queen bee effects" undermine women's ability to be successful as a group (p. 164). Gen-X/Millennial clergy women must negotiate both of these gendered realities based on others' expectations of their leadership and job performance as a pastor, as well as expectations of their gender identity and role congruency as a woman.

There has been a recent surge of feminist critical scholarship on the underlying issues at play that cause women executives to experience higher levels of burnout than their male counterparts (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Dwivedi, 2023; Hasseldine, 2017; Marrone, 2018; Nagoski & Nagoksi, 2020; Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Each seeks to critique socially constructed aspects of women's leadership and gendered expectations of boundarylessness, compliance, and overfunctioning that create unsustainable work environments for women leaders. Such scholarship calls out the need for further qualitative and quantitative research that address gendered expectations of female boundary-lessness, which continue to be conditioned into women in both personal and professional spheres. In their work on psychological burnout of women, Nagoski and Nagoski (2020) described societal expectations of the self-sacrificial and

boundaryless woman as the "human giver syndrome," whereby women are expected to "give to humanity through their time, attention, affection, and bodies" (p. xiii). This work sheds light on the social phenomenon whereby human givers who attempt to care for themselves through certain self-protective boundaries face punitive measures in both private and public spheres where women's interpersonal boundaries are rejected. Moreover, there is continued cultural grooming of women in White, Western, and economically privileged social contexts to be perfectionists, overachievers, and people pleasers, which often aids in women securing high-level leadership positions. However, these are the very qualities that cause women to hold less stringent boundaries and experience emotional and physical burn out in those same leadership roles (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020). Such cultural conditioning points to the need for further research on the impact of family systems theory (Bowen & Kerr, 1988) and relational cultural theory (Jordan et al., 1991; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2019) as it relates to interpersonal and professional boundaries and psychological safety, which will be discussed further below.

While there is a growth in scholarship exploring gender and workplace psychological safety, there is a need for more constructivist research on the gendered construction of interpersonal leadership boundaries. Boundaries come into view in any social context through the embodied perceptions between individuals. However, there is an added nuance in caregiving professions, where others' embodied perceptions of women leaders are shaped by leadership expectations that emerged when these professions were dominated by men. In addition, while previous research on leadership boundaries has focused on the boundary spanning work of leaders and psychological safety of work teams (Faraj & Yan, 2009), little attention has been placed on how leaders themselves regulate and communicate their own interpersonal boundaries before their audience/followers, and to what extent those boundaries are accepted or rejected.

Therefore, there is a need for more feminist constructivist research that explores interpersonal leadership boundaries in ways that address conflicting gender-identity narratives. As a result of this gap in research, I intentionally applied a feminist constructive lens in order to address the social practices that resist the healthy and appropriate interpersonal boundaries held by self-differentiated Gen-X/Millennial Protestant clergy women.

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) and Family Systems Theory

As one considers the gendered construction of leadership boundaries in the context of Protestant church culture, important insights can be drawn from Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) and family systems theory, which both address relational space and self-differentiation. As stated by Walker (2019) in her work on reconstructing race, "Our brains store information and memories that are not consistently available to conscious awareness, yet they influence our interactions in profound ways" (p. 19). This subconscious level of interpersonal relationship touches deeply on the earlier discussion on Merleau-Ponty's (1945) pre-reflective aspects of embodied perception. A central concept that runs through RCT is "central relational paradox," which acknowledges that humans are "hardwired for relationship," yet we are extremely cautious of those very same relationships as they can be a site of overwhelming friction and harm (Walker, 2019, p. 28). Pastors are particularly aware of this paradox as they strive for relational clarity, continually delineating where they as leaders end and their parishioners begin (Roberts, 2016). The practice of self-differentiation involves identification with another's emotional state, yet at the same time maintaining an awareness that "the source of the affect is in the other" (Jordan, 1991, p. 69). In her work on relational teaching, Schwartz (2019) described this process of relational clarity as a "conscious and ever-evolving sense of where our experience and emotion stops and where the student's starts" (p. 21). This theoretical framework is highly

instructive when exploring the challenges and vulnerabilities that women clergy face as they negotiate boundaries within the pastor-parishioner relationship.

Relational cultural theory (RCT), initially termed self-in-relation theory, has its roots in the groundbreaking work of feminist psychologist Jean Baker Miller, with particular attention on the significance of empathy within mother-daughter relationships. Initially outlined in Miller's (1976) seminal work *Toward a New Psychology of Women* and developed further in *Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center* (Jordan et al., 1991), this new era of psychology challenged early twentieth-century American psychoanalysis and its privileging of a distinctly male model of solo achievement. While such previous understandings prioritized the individual self over relational growth, RCT looked to the initial empathetic relationship cultivated between mothers and daughters as a more sustainable model for human development, based on personal growth through integration within relationships (Jordan et al., 1991, p. 68). This alternative model of empathetic relationality is central to the work of congregational ministry, yet there are important implications when it comes to boundary permeability and violations of women clergy boundaries and psychological safety. In addition, there is a need to address oversimplification and idealization of the mother-daughter relationship. Further discussion on the "mother-daughter wound" (Hasseldine, 2017) and the prevalence of intergenerational conflict between women in Protestant church culture is included in Chapters IV and V.

Integration of Sensitizing Concepts

As outlined above, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Gen-X/Millennial Protestant clergy women who have left their ministry contexts because they felt their interpersonal boundaries were violated and/or their psychological safety threatened.

Having presented a critical review of literature on the social context of women clergy within American Protestantism, embodied leadership and perception, and the gendered construction of leadership boundaries, several sensitizing concepts have been revealed that shed light on the topic of women clergy boundaries and psychological safety. As illustrated in Figure 2.2, salient social dynamics and sensitizing concepts include: (1) long-standing male hetero-normativity of pastoral leadership; (2) historical anxiety over women's leadership and the female body; (3) younger age of women's ordination and access to senior-level positions; (4) conflicting gender identity narratives; (5) intergenerational dynamics between younger clergy and largely Baby Boomer congregations; (6) increased clergy boundary-setting around the pastoral role; (7) reduced clerical authority and high boundary permeability within congregational culture; (8) insufficient training of volunteer HR committees; and (9) lack of secular legal representation for clergy.

Figure 2.2

Sensitizing Concepts Related to Clergy Women Boundaries and Psychological Safety

Historical	Relational	Structural
Longstanding male hetero-normativity of pastoral leadership	Conflicting gender identity narratives	Reduced clerical authority and high boundary permeability within congregational culture
Historical anxiety over women's leadership and the female body	Intergenerational dynamics between young clergy and largely Baby Boomer congregations	Insufficient training of volunteer HR committees
Younger age of women's ordination and access to senior level positions	Increased clergy boundary-setting around pastoral role	Lack of secular legal representation for clergy

It is important to note that these historical, relational, and structural dynamics are not exhaustive and may not capture specific underlying realities within individual congregations and pastor-parishioner relationships. Moreover, given that this study applied constructivist grounded

theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014), the literature review provides a landscape of sensitizing concepts, which will be suspended during the data collecting process in order to prioritize participants' own meaning makes processes. While these social dynamics and theoretical concepts informed my interpretive framework regarding women clergy psychological safety and decisions to leave active ministry, these sensitizing concepts were not determinative nor did they represent a complete or finalized theoretic standpoint. To the contrary, as I became fully engaged in the analysis and interpretation of data (Birks & Mills, 2015), I inevitably revised and expanded upon these sensitizing concepts, as well as identifying new concepts and emergent theory reflected in the compiled data. The more complete theoretical concepts drawn from the research findings of this study are included in Chapters IV and V. The historical, relational, and cultural factors outlined above provided the basis for the sensitizing concepts that informed, but did not determine, the final theoretical propositions of this feminist constructivist grounded theory study.

Summary

This critical review of literature outlined the social context of women clergy within American Protestantism, with an analysis of the relevant theoretical frameworks of embodied leadership and perception, and the gendered construction of leadership boundaries. This analysis revealed significant gaps in research that justified a feminist constructivist qualitative study of Gen-X/Millennial women clergy who have left active ministry due to violations of their own boundaries and psychological safety. The primary gaps in literature include: (1) While there is increased feminist constructivist research on systemic gender bias against women priests in the Anglican church where women's ordination is more recent (Jagger, 2021; Page, 2016; Roberts, 2016; Shorter, 2021), research on women clergy in American Protestantism, where women's ordination is more firmly established, continues to utilize a predominantly post-positivist perspective (Frame, 2004; Myers, 2020; Zikmund, et al., 1998) that promotes surface-level

solutions such as individualized therapy, mentoring, and increased self-care practices. (2) There is no current research within mainline American Protestantism that addresses the conflicting gender-identity narratives negotiated by Gen-X/Millennial women clergy within largely Baby Boomer congregations. (3) While research on gender and leadership in non-religious professions have identified such social dynamics as women's executive derailment (Bono et al., 2017) the "glass cliff" phenomenon (Ellemers et al., 2012; Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007) and "push-to-leave" forces that effect rapid turnover of women executives (Dwivedi et al., 2023), there is currently no rigorous constructivist qualitative research on such dynamics as they relate to Protestant clergy women. Based on these gaps in research, Chapter III will outline the feminist constructivist grounded theory methodology used to explore the lived experiences of young women clergy who have left their ministry contexts due to violations of their own interpersonal boundaries and threats to their psychological safety.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview and Rationale

The previous review of literature revealed a gap in feminist constructivist qualitative research on Gen-X/Millennial clergy women within mainline American Protestantism who have left active ministry due to concerns over their psychological safety and interpersonal boundaries. Constructivist research on women clergy boundaries is found predominantly among British and Australian scholars exploring the Anglican church where women's ordination is more recent and gender discrimination more overt (Jagger, 2021; Page, 2016; Roberts, 2016). In contrast, there is very little constructivist research on women clergy in the context of American Protestantism (Jagger, 2021; Page, 2016; Roberts, 2016). In contrast, there is very little constructivist research on women clergy in the context of American Protestantism where women's ordination is well-established, which may be due to the assumption that with greater representation of women in pastoral leadership, issues of gender-based conflict have been largely resolved (Becker, 2000). Post-positivist qualitative studies that do explore American Protestantism argue that women clergy are soft on boundaries and therefore need to make individual adjustments to their own relationships to the pastoral role (Burnett, 2017; Zikmund et al., 1998), as opposed to a more constructivist approach that problematizes the ways in which women clergy boundaries are perceived by others (Jagger, 2021; Page, 2016; Roberts, 2016). Lastly, the methodologies used within both American and Anglican contexts focus heavily on surveys (Zikmund et al., 1998) and descriptive analysis of unstructured interviews (Page, 2016). While these methodologies offered a strong foundation for this study, they do not adequately address the more tacit dynamics and hidden social processes related to gender bias, embodied perception, and boundary regulation within Protestant church culture. The use of feminist constructivist grounded theory

methodology for this study built upon this earlier research in order to explore the lived experiences of clergy women who have left active ministry because they felt their personal boundaries were violated and/or psychological safety threatened.

In determining a research methodology, it is important to understand its philosophical origins and unique characteristics as it relates to epistemology and overall research process. In doing so, the researcher is able to assess methodological fit as it relates to the intended research question, as well as prepare the researcher for a particular pathway of inquiry (Birks & Mills, 2012). The following discussion outlines the evolution of grounded theory methodology (GTM) and the development of feminist constructivist GTM, which was used in this study on the interpersonal boundaries and psychological safety of Protestant clergy women. The following analysis outlines the foundation of grounded theory as a qualitative research methodology, with its founders Barney Glaser and Anslem Strauss (1967) holding different perspectives on the use of inductive and abductive reasoning in developing new theory. Following Strauss' departure from the original positivist paradigm, this chapter outlines the development of dimensional analysis (Kools et al., 1996; Schatzman, 1991) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2014), which has led to more intersectional approaches, including feminist grounded theory (Wuest, 1995) and situational analysis (Clarke, 2005). Throughout this discussion, there is an assessment of the methodological fit of constructivist feminist grounded theory to address the following research question: What is the experience of Gen-X/Millennial Protestant clergy women who have left active ministry because they felt that their interpersonal and professional boundaries were violated and/or their physical or psychological safety was threatened?

Grounded Theory Methodology

Grounded theory is a qualitative and inductive approach that focuses on how individual research participants process and make sense of problematic situations in their lives (Mohajan, 2022). The original theory was established by American sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1965) through their collaborative research on the awareness of dying in hospital settings, followed by their subsequent elaboration of the methodology in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As a highly systematic qualitative research methodology, grounded theory applies rigorous data collection and interpretation more evident in quantitative methods, while at the same time allowing a highly flexible process that generates new theories about social phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014). Originally described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a research methodology that grounds theory within the data, grounded theory has evolved over the past few decades, with reinterpretations by several students of Glaser and Strauss, including the constructivist approach put forth by Kathy Charmaz (2014) and situational analysis developed by Adele Clarke (2005).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed grounded theory out of a need to equip both quantitative and qualitative researchers with ways to generate new theory regarding the lived experiences of research participants, as opposed to merely testing theory, which both had observed as the predominant approach of empirical research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mohajan, 2022). Both scholars demonstrated that new theory could be built by constantly cross-examining the data, discovering what concepts and hypotheses are relevant for an area, and verificationally building on that theory by returning to the field for further depth and scope of understanding of the emerging issues (Boychuck Duchscher & Morgan, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The main strategy of grounded theory is constant comparative analysis, in which every piece of coded data

is compared with every other piece of data, as well as comparisons to subsequent concepts and categories, during which the developing theory begins to take form (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Regardless of the qualitative or quantitative nature of the research as well as differences in researcher epistemology, constant comparative analysis between data and emerging theory is the hallmark of grounded theory. Additional key elements of grounded theory include analytical memoing that reflect the researchers' process of interpretation, alongside coding of data, development of concepts, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, and theoretical integration (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 37). The concurrent nature of data collection and interpretation is an important feature of grounded theory, as it enables theory to be develop from within the data itself (Cullen & Brennan, 2021).

Grounded theory is a highly nuanced research methodology that applies a rigorous approach of data collection and interpretation to build new and substantive theory around complex social phenomenon. As Morse (2001) notes, grounded theory is commonly used to develop mid-range theory around human interactions and experiences which involve hidden, tacit, and complex layers of identity related to self and others such as "trust, resilience, caring [and] coping" (p. 3). This was reflected in Glaser and Strauss' (1965) initial research collaboration on the topic of end-of-life hospital care. Such emphasis on more subconscious or internal psycho-social processes made grounded theory a useful methodology for the exploration of women clergy boundaries and psychological safety.

The choice of the term "grounded theory" is based on the development of social theory grounded in, or coming out of, the data itself. In the case of Glaser and Strauss' (1965) hospital-based study, the data collected were the lived experiences of hospital staff and terminal patients and their various levels of awareness of approaching death. For six years, Glaser and

Strauss conducted in-depth and multi-faceted fieldwork involving observations of nurses and physicians at work, as well as interviews with medical staff and patients at various stages of the dying process. They noted that within the hospital context, death occurred along a wide continuum of speedy to slow, expected to unexpected, anticipated to unanticipated. By drawing out theory from the apparent similarities and differences within these experiences, Glaser and Strauss sought to "contribute toward creating end-of-life care that was more rational and compassionate" (Andrews, 2015).

There is significant contextual crossover between Glaser and Strauss' exploration of end-of-life hospital care and the realities of congregational ministry. Both contexts involve deep and often-unintelligible psychological as well as spiritual realities, with varying levels of openness to exploring existential conversations. There is also an extremely fraught landscape of emotional vulnerability related to identity, personhood, and the need for comfort and validation, as well a longing for wholeness, as outlined by Reiss (2015). It is interesting to note that *Awareness of Dying* (1965) has become a widely used training manual for hospital chaplaincy (Andrews, 2015), which is a required element of pastoral training in most Protestant denominations. Based on the contextual relatability between hospital care for terminal patients and pastoral leadership in local congregations, there is considerable synergy between grounded methodology and the exploration of women clergy boundaries and psychological safety.

Glaserian vs. Straussian Grounded Theory

The rigorous methodological approach of grounded theory points to the particular research pathways and educational backgrounds of both Glaser and Strauss. Glaser's work was based in quantitative and qualitative math at Columbia University as well as contemporary literary criticism and theory construction at the University of Paris. Strauss, on the other hand,

was immersed in the study of symbolic interactionism at the University of Chicago (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It has been surmised that Strauss sought out Glaser due to his strong background in quantitative research, rigorous data collection, and his multi-layered approach to analysis and interpretation. The application of Glaser's quantitative approach was groundbreaking within Strauss' qualitative research on the awareness of dying, during a time when "qualitative methodology was viewed with suspicion by the scientific community in favor of reductionistic quantification" (Boychuck Duchscher & Morgan, 2004, p. 606). The unique feature of Glaser and Strauss' combined research methods was the systematic approach to qualitative data collection, coding, and interpretation.

Charmaz (2003) described the fundamental process of doing grounded theory, noting the following key principals:

> a) simultaneous data collection and analysis, (b) pursuit of emergent themes through early data analysis, (c) discovery of basic social processes within the data, (d) inductive construction of abstract categories that explain and synthesize these processes, (e) sampling to refine the categories through comparative processes, and (f) integration of categories into a theoretical framework that specifies causes, conditions, and consequences of the studied processes. (p. 677)

From this systematic approach came two techniques central to grounded theory: theoretical sampling and constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is through these two approaches that "the logic and rigor of quantitative data analysis [is applied] to qualitative data" (Cooney, 2010, p. 19). However, while the initial partnership between Glaser and Strauss reflected a complementary relationship between their research approaches and scholarly background, epistemological differences in their approach to emergent theory led to an important divergence and new directions in grounded theory.

Following the establishment of grounded theory in 1967, Strauss and Glaser eventually promoted different methodological pathways based on their understandings of emergent versus

assumed theory. Glaser (1998) underscored grounded theory's primary emphasis on the emergent nature of theory, which he argued should never "force meaning on a participant, but rather. . . listen to his genuine meanings, to grasp his perspectives, to study his concerns" (p. 32). Glaser remained true to his commitment to inductive reasoning and emergent theory while Strauss stressed the importance of deductive reasoning using theoretical framework construction and verification (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Heath & Cowley, 2004; McGhee et al., 2007). This distinction centers on whether the researcher(s) should apply previously held personal theories and/or sensitizing concepts to the process of data collection and interpretation, with Glaser maintaining that a review of the literature should only be conducted following data analysis. Cooney (2010) observed further distinction between Glaser and Strauss, noting that Glaser preferred substantive and theoretical coding while Strauss described three coding pathways including open, axial, and selective coding (p. 20). Amid these different epistemologies and methods of data collection and interpretation, both continued to maintain the original grounded theory techniques of theoretical sampling and constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

As these differences were identified, it was Strauss' approach that continued to evolve beyond the original positivist paradigm, in which Strauss acknowledged that there may be different explanations for what is emerging from the data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued that surrounding context is not merely background material but is essential to the process of data analysis. With such allowance for social context and researcher positionality, Strauss' approach became more aligned with contemporary constructivist thinking. Cooney (2010) pointed out that it is important for researchers to clarify whether they are taking a Glaserian or Straussian approach, as it reveals important aspects of the researcher's epistemology, with Glaser tending toward a post-positivist perspective and Strauss aligning with constructivist epistemology.

Despite the importance of this decision with regard to research design and application, little is written about how researchers come to make this decision and what research priorities, philosophies, or epistemologies influence that decision. My choice and rationale for using constructivist grounded theory, and its evolution from Strauss' post-positivist approach, will be discussed further below.

There are both opportunities and limitations in choosing a Glaserian or Straussian grounded theory approach. Glaser's positivist stance may enable a more open approach to data collection, as the researcher seeks to avoid any preconceived theoretical framework. However, one might also consider this approach more restricted because it does not take into account other realities and contexts that may inform the data. Strauss' post-positivist approach has clearer guidelines for data analysis and seems more structured. However, the use of researcher positionality and received theory significantly expands or, some may argue, corrupts the theoretical landscape and potential conclusions that are drawn from the data. As Robrecht (1995) points out, those who apply Strauss' evolved approach should be mindful of looking *at* the data instead of looking *for* data.

As Strauss and Corbin (1998) continued to evolve their thinking, a more holistic approach began to take form in which researchers were encouraged to "trust their instincts and not focus too closely on the analytical procedures" (Cooney, 2010, p. 22). Strauss and Corbin (1998) explicitly stated, "The important thing is to trust oneself and the process. Students should stay within the general guidelines. . . and use the procedures and techniques flexibly according to their abilities and the realities of their studies" (p. 295). Cooney (2010) noted that this statement suggests that it is the researchers' application of the procedures that is at fault rather than the procedures themselves. Cooney also pointed out that increased attention to study context

and acknowledgment of its impact is seen by some Glaserian scholars as providing overly abstract data that deviates from the original goals of producing clear theory. However, as Straussian scholars will argue, it is this additional layer of contextual social system dynamics and landscapes that points to a "broader vision and purpose of grounded theory" (Cooney, 2010, p. 23). Ultimately, it is at the researcher's discretion whether to promote a Glaserian (1998) approach that seeks to build discrete theory from data alone, or to apply the contextualizing techniques of Strauss and Corbin (1998) to produce useful descriptions that are beyond the more limited focus of theory building. Based on these divergent approaches to grounded theory, it is important for researchers to be explicit about their methodological choice and the underlying philosophy and analytical approach that will guide their research process and outcomes (Boychuck Duchscher & Morgan, 2004). My decision to apply feminist constructivist grounded theory methodology will be discussed further below, including its methodological fit for my study on the psychological safety of Gen-X/Millennial Protestant clergy women.

Dimensional Analysis and Constructivist Grounded Theory

During the 1990s it became clear that alternate applications of grounded theory were being taught and utilized, reinforcing a more multi-layered and diverse understanding of grounded theory (Kools et al., 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This shift emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, when qualitative methodologist Leonard Schatzman began to develop a new tool of grounded theory analysis which he termed dimensional analysis (Schatzman, 1991; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). A colleague of Strauss', Schatzman identified a gap in the instruction of research dynamics in the classroom and the actual practice and articulation of the analytic process in the research field (Kools et al., 1996). Schatzman (1991) referred to the process of "natural analysis," whereby researchers interpret the intricacies of both ordinary life

as well as more complex social phenomenon "through interpretive actions that one naturally and commonly employs everyday" (p. 314). Dimensionality is defined as an "individual's ability to address the complexity of a phenomenon by noting its attributes, context, process, and meaning" (Kools et al., 1996, p. 315). By applying smaller, more familiar sets of dimensions, drawn from the original use of symbolic interactionism in grounded theory practice, as opposed to the highly developed research mechanics of open, axial, and selective coding later promoted by Strauss, Schatzman sought to clarify and simplify the process of data analysis in order to uphold theoretical sensitivity (p. 315).

Both natural analysis and dimensionality question Glaser and Strauss' (1967) original dismissal of the use of received theory as a valid tool for data analysis. Instead, through Schatzman's use of dimensional analysis, prior knowledge and sensitizing concepts are considered valid lenses through which to understand complex social phenomenon. The divergent pathways of traditional grounded theory and dimensional analysis can be summarized by two core conceptual questions, with classical grounded theory asking "What is the *basic social process* that underlies the phenomenon of interest" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), versus "What *all* is involved here?" (Schatzman, 1991). As Schatzman and Strauss (1973) argued, "The researcher is free to think of any and all pertinent theories and assumptions about his subject matter, and thereby frees himself from substantive orthodoxy" (p. 12). Such personal and received theories, grounded in practice wisdom and a critical review of relevant literature, enable the researcher to gain foundational knowledge in the subject areas of interest as well as the capacity to raise relevant questions. Overall, this highly engaged process enables the researcher to employ a more flexible relationship to the research content, which ideally promotes the generation of new and more nuanced theory. Such openness to research positionality, sensitizing concepts, and practice

wisdom is important for this study due to my own feminist epistemology and my previous professional experience as an ordained clergy within the context of mainline Protestant parish ministry.

Through dimensional analysis, the researcher is encouraged to expand the realm of conceptual possibilities by identifying smaller pieces of data and relevant dimensions that may be overlooked in explaining a phenomenon. These micro-dimensions are identified and elaborated upon through ongoing memos written by the researcher as formulations develop, thereby tracking the development of theory as it evolves (Kools et al., 1996). This memoing process leads to an explanatory matrix, which identifies various dimensions of the phenomenon in question. This matrix becomes the primary framework and structure, enabling a more complete explanation of the theories eventually drawn from the data (Schatzman, 1991). The researcher then interrogates the identified dimensions, considering each one as a potential central dimension or "organizing perspective." A central dimension is eventually selected, which provides "the most fruitful explanation of the phenomenon under consideration." Following the identification of the central or organizing perspective, the researcher than re-integrates the remaining dimensions through the lens of the organizing perspective (Kools et al., 1996, pp. 318–319).

Although dimensional analysis is aligned with traditional grounded theory methodology, the more intentional use of contextuality and natural analysis draws out the importance of researcher positionality and the heterogeneity of knowledge production, which reflects a more constructivist epistemology. In its original form outlined by Strauss and Glaser (1967), classical grounded theory maintained a distinctly positivist paradigm, which seeks to attain a singular objective truth, drawn of objective assessment of data. While Glaser (1998) continued to

promote this positivist epistemology, postmodernist thinking incorporated the positionality of the researcher and the sociology of knowledge, which challenges the positivistic premise of the neutral observer, initially supported by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In contrast to a positivist approach that assumes an objective truth, naturalist researchers "question the possibility of uniformly shared understandings. . . and the researchers themselves become the data-gathering instrument whose skills in listening, observing, and understanding are crucial" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3). This naturalist constructivist approach values the multi-faceted understandings of both the researcher and the individual(s) being researched, which is consistent with my feminist epistemology of centering women's voices and experiences as a rigorous source of knowledge production (Wuest, 1995). My application of feminist epistemology to constructivist grounded theory methodology will be discussed further below.

Charmaz (2000) identified Glaser's original grounded theory as a distinctly positivist methodology as he assumed "an objective, external reality, a neutral observer who discovers data, reductionist inquiry of manageable research problems, and objectivist rendering of data" (p. 510). Annells (1997) and Bryant and Charmaz (2007) argued further that more recent developments of Glaserian grounded theory promoted a realist ontology that aligned with post-positivism, while Strauss eventually adopted a relativist ontology more aligned with constructivism. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constructivist bend was based on their acknowledgement that the "researcher and the researched create the theory together (Cooney, 2010, p. 24). The overall shift of Straussian grounded theory to a constructivist paradigm came with Corbin's more explicit acceptance of constructivism and the co-creation of knowledge, involving both the research participant's narrative construction and the resulting construction of concepts and theories by the researcher (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) departure from the positivist-aligned grounded theory originally outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) led to what is known as constructivist grounded theory. Developed by Kathy Charmaz (2014), constructivist grounded theory seeks to resist positivistic approaches in qualitative research whereby "researchers erased the subjectivity they brought to their studies rather than acknowledging it and engaging in reflexivity" (p. 14). Reflexivity is incorporated in several unique ways within constructivist grounded theory, including (1) theoretical sensitivity and the use of sensitizing concepts included in the preliminary review of literature; (2) a research question developed before the study begins; and (3) the use of memo-writing throughout the data interpretation process. However, Charmaz is also clear that any theoretical assumptions and background are only "points of departure" from which to develop further ideas (p. 30). This is in contrast to Glasser and Strauss (1967), whose initial positivist stance urged researchers to maintain a "blank slate," which often precludes the use of a critical review of literature. Charmaz (2014), on the other hand, argued the importance of a constructivist approach in which one acknowledges the inevitability of the researcher being predisposed to knowledge and experience that shape the researcher's assumptions.

A constructivist approach involves both personal theory and received theory, which influence the research design and interpretation of data, followed by preliminary theory that emerges through data collection and interpretation. As Charmaz (2014) noted, the researcher's background assumptions and disciplinary perspectives can increase the researcher's awareness of certain possibilities and processes in their data. However, the researcher must also "be willing to revise or relinquish [personal and received theory], should their interpretations of the data so indicate" (p. 30). The existence of personal theory is reinforced by what is known as "practice wisdom," which Scott (1990) referred to as "incipient induction" involving "lengthy exposure to

similar situations through which unconscious associations are established between certain features of cases" (p. 565). Therefore, while constructivist researchers bring their own positionality, personal and received theories, as well as sensitizing concepts through extensive research and practice wisdom, this background must be temporarily suspended, as much as possible, throughout the data collection process in order to prioritize the meaning-making processes of the research participants. Therefore, the co-creation of knowledge embraced by Corbin and Strauss (2008) finds its fullest expression in Charmaz's (2000) understanding of constructivist grounded theory, which recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, while at the same time prioritizing the research participants' own meaning-making processes (p. 510). This co-creative process and amplification of the lived experiences of both the researcher and the research participants, greatly influenced my decision to apply a feminist constructivist approach to this grounded theory study, which will be discussed further below.

Rieger (2019) summarizes the costs and benefits of each approach noting that classical Glaserian grounded theory emphasizes objective emergence from the data at the cost of contextual concepts that may be lost or invisible within the data. Straussian grounded theory, on the other hand, focuses on researcher reflexivity and abductive reasoning, which some argue forces data interpretation making it highly subjective. Applying this more reflexive approach, constructivist grounded theory offers more clearly described strategies than Glaserian grounded theory, yet seeks more fluidity in its interpretive process than Straussian grounded theory (p. 8). It is this diversity of perspectives and approaches within constructivist grounded theory that makes it extremely appealing and versatile within qualitative research, in particular as it relates to intersectional research that involves overlapping social identities of both researcher and

research participants. Due to the highly flexible nature of constructivist grounded theory, it has become a particularly useful methodology for research that is attentive to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Holloway and Schwartz (2018) emphasize the unique ability of constructivist grounded theory to attend to critical aspects of intersectionality, particularly in fields of leadership and organizational psychology, which are often not sufficiently scrutinized in other methodologies, noting:

> Grounded theory has the potential to uncover the elusive qualities of the workplace, take the researcher beyond hegemonic understandings of organizations, hold as central the participants and their stories, portray complex interactions, include an intersectional stance and make visible the role of silence; all elements that situate grounded theory as a viable and powerful method for EDI research. (p. 497)

In summary, the evolution of Glaser and Strauss' early collaboration in the 1950s to present-day postmodernist qualitative research approaches, reveals that grounded theory can be conducted within a variety of qualitative paradigms and epistemological outlooks. As Birks and Mills (2015) pointed out, a dualistic approach toward methodological choice is unhelpful, in which a researcher selects either (1) traditional or positivist Glaserian grounded theory or (2) post-positivist Straussian or constructivist grounded theory. By limiting grounded theory selection to these two seemingly opposite vantage points, researchers fail to capture the nuanced philosophical approaches of their methodological choice, which are important to acknowledge explicitly when planning and reporting on a particular study (p. 9). The flexibility and multi-layered nature of grounded theory enables more nuanced approaches, such as feminist grounded theory, to emerge from constructivist-oriented grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory and the offshoots of situational analysis and feminist grounded theory reflect what Lincoln and Guba (2013) described as the pathway toward opening up the 'hidden in social life" which "exposes the linkages between seemingly unrelated social phenomenon – in order to begin to

think about whether this is the world we wanted to create, and if not, what would be our alternative proposal" (p. 10). It is this desire to reveal what has been systematically hidden and silenced through engrained and often harmful gender identity narratives, that makes feminist constructivist grounded theory an appropriate methodology for my research on the psychological safety and interpersonal boundaries of Gen-X/Millennial Protestant clergy women.

Feminist Grounded Theory

The following discussion outlines various positions that inform my own feminist epistemology, which I applied to the constructivist grounded theory methodology used in this study. Some consider constructivist grounded theory to be an inherently feminist methodology. I disagree with this assertion and do not see constructivist research as automatically engaging a feminist lens. Therefore, I applied a distinctly feminist approach to this constructivist grounded theory study in order to (1) explicitly center the voices and lived experiences of women research participants as well as (2) promote liberative research that interrogates socially constructed understandings of gender. As a result of these choices, I was consciously attentive to the ways in which gender and conflicting gender narratives effected the psychological safety and interpersonal boundaries experienced by the women in this study. Specific elements of my feminist epistemology will be outlined further below.

The focused nature of feminist constructivist grounded theory raises the question whether feminist critical analysis might be its own distinct methodology, which elicits varying viewpoints among feminist scholars. Harding (1987) argued that feminist epistemology is a useful tool or lens in developing method and methodology, but should not be considered the methodology itself. Similarly, Reinharz (1992) pointed out that research methodology may be defined as qualitative, while the feminist delineation is applied to the procedures, methods, and techniques

within the research design. Feminist epistemology can be understood as both a feminist standpoint and feminist empiricism, both of which have informed my own research methods and methodology. Feminist standpoint epistemology grounds research methodologies in the analysis of women's material realities, while feminist empiricism attends to feminist responses to biases and problems within traditional disciplines (Harding, 1987; Mohojan, 2022, p. 47). While my primary focus is on the lived experiences of women, my feminist lens also addresses the ways in which socially constructed gender narratives affect men and nonbinary individuals. In considering these positions, I have applied to this study both a feminist standpoint epistemology as well as feminist empiricism, which I will describe further below.

Throughout this study, I utilized a feminist standpoint epistemology, as I sought to center women's voices as a vital source of knowledge. While this study focused on specifically women clergy, my feminist epistemology applies more broadly to the social construction of gender for any individual, including men and nonbinary identities. Through this feminist lens, I sought to highlight the material realities (Harding, 1987) of clergy women and their lived experiences of psychological safety and interpersonal boundaries. However, as will be discussed in Chapter IV's research findings, my feminist standpoint also applied to interrogating the gendered narratives of those surrounding the clergy women, as it related to the women's experiences.

Centering women's experiences as a critical source of knowledge production reflects the feminist understanding of the sociology of knowledge offered by Canadian nursing scholar Judith Wuest (1995), who provided the first comprehensive introduction to feminist grounded theory. Wuest observed a lack of gender-informed grounded theory research and the need to value the lived experiences and perspectives of women, specifically within the nursing profession and its highly gender-stratified context of hospital staffing. Interestingly, both

traditional and feminist grounded theory approaches emerged out of the health care field, with Glaser and Strauss (1965) exploring the various levels of awareness of dying in the hospital setting. In the field of nursing, Wuest (1995) outlined the congruency between feminist research and grounded theory by observing areas of shared epistemology. The basis of symbolic interactionism within grounded theory points to individuals' subjective understanding of their own experiences as a source of knowledge. This supports my feminist understanding of "women as knowers," with their experience understood as a valuable source of knowledge (p. 128).

Feminist grounded theory is an important methodology for studying both public spaces of organizational leadership as well as private and domestic spaces, which reinforces the feminist premise that the personal/private is political/public (Hanisch, 1970). In her research on intimate partner violence, Allen (2011) stressed the need for feminist grounded theory based on its intended ethos of decolonization, noting:

> Qualitative research was seen to be allied to the colonial enterprise as it tried to understand the "exotic other" as a "primitive, non-White person from a foreign culture" . . . . [Likewise] much research into women's experiences of intimate partner violence is also an attempt to understand "the other." (p. 23)

The ability for grounded theory to include women as research participants who are experts in their own experience and provide critical insights from their own perspectives, supports my own feminist ontological and epistemological framework. A central tenet to my own feminist outlook within this study was the prioritization of knowledge production within each of the women's experiences, as opposed to such knowledge being drawn from external experts, researchers, or the methodological process.

In addition to applying a feminist standpoint epistemology in this study, I also engaged in feminist empiricism by promoting a liberative form of research that interrogated narratives and systems of gender oppression. Through this feminist lens, I sought to problematize certain biases

within traditional Protestant theology and practice, and scholarship on leadership boundaries and psychological safety, as outlined in Chapter II. In addition, my feminist empiricism scrutinized the androcentric elements of social theories surrounding servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 2002) and mimetic scapegoating (Girard, 1966), which will be discussed further in Chapter V. Grounded theory methodology, even in its more constructivist forms, allows but does not compel researchers to explore structural inequalities and power dynamics within social processes. Feminist constructivist grounded theory, on the other hand, deliberately focuses on questions of agency, power, and voice within larger social phenomenon, thereby resulting in more nuanced outcomes that may contribute to greater social transformation and systemic change. The need for a grounded theory strategy guided by feminist critical perspectives is outlined by Kushner and Marrow (2003), who argue:

> Isolated as a pure methodology, grounded theory does not offer any specific guidelines with respect to research priorities, theoretical presuppositions, or normative standpoints. Symbolic interactionism, taken alone, has not fully elaborated its relation to other interactionist perspectives (e.g. poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, critical theory) and is not adequately sensitized to issues relating to alienation, power, and domination. . . . A critically interested grounded theory methodology, therefore, is intended to result in the generation of knowledge that contributes to meaningful understandings and explanations of human interaction in the social world, these in turn potentially contributing to emancipatory transformation. (p. 37)

The liberative potential of feminist constructivist grounded theory research is a central tenet in my own feminist critical approach and a guiding feature that I applied throughout this study. Therefore, my feminist epistemology is twofold in that it (1) promotes a feminist standpoint that concretizes the reality of “women as knowers” (Wuest, 1995, p. 128) whose lived experiences are a critical source of knowledge; and (2) upholds feminist empiricism as it seeks “emancipatory liberation” (Kushner & Marrow, 2003, p. 37) for those who participate in and engage in the research.

In studying the development of constructivist grounded theory, an interesting observation was shared by Charmaz (2000) that serves as a touchstone for exploring feminist grounded theory. When she first presented her constructivist position during a plenary presentation in 1993, some eight years before her first formal publication on the topic, Charmaz observed that responses to constructivist grounded theory split along gender lines, with women audience members more readily welcoming the constructivist perspective (p. 14). While it is oversimplified to argue that constructivist grounded theory holds an inherently feminist approach, it does question to what extent positivist grounded theory may systematically silence a feminist or intersectional perspective. During the 1990s, it became apparent among feminist scholars that positivist grounded theory and certain applications of constructivist grounded theory did not sufficiently take into account gender criticism. Therefore, feminist grounded theory developed out of the need to apply a distinctly feminist epistemology to the original grounded theory framework put for by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

I agree that constructivist grounded theory does not automatically or inherently apply a feminist critical lens, even though the methodology itself has the potential to center the meaning-making processes of individuals as they address various aspects of gender identity construction. Therefore, my use of feminist constructivist grounded theory for this study explicitly engaged a feminist critical lens to explore the lived experiences of clergy women as they navigated conflicting gender narratives and expectations within Protestant church culture. Through my intentional study design choices presented later in this chapter, and my interpretive lenses addressed in Chapter V, I sought to promote an intentionally liberative study, not only for the research participants, but for myself as the researcher, and the individuals who engage with the research.

There are various scholarly positions as to whether there is in fact a distinct feminist methodology within qualitative research. While Harding (1987), Reinharz (1992), and Allen (2011) argued that a feminist methodology does not exist, Fonow and Cook (2005) argued that there is a feminist methodology in social science that "involves the description, explanation, and justification of techniques used in feminist research and is an abstract classification that refers to a variety of methodological stances, conceptual approaches, and research strategies" (p. 2213). In considering these various positions, I do not believe there is a distinct feminist methodology. Instead, I support the assertion of Rajan and Kalbhor (2018) that feminist research covers the full range of knowledge building that includes epistemology, methodology, and method. Therefore, this study utilizes a feminist constructivist grounded theory methodology, meaning that my methodological choice of constructivist grounded theory is further developed and supported by my feminist standpoint epistemology and feminist empiricism. As outlined above, my feminist standpoint epistemology seeks to center women's voices and experiences (Wuest, 1995) and deconstruct socially oppressive constructions of gender, while my commitment to feminist empiricism seeks to promote "liberative and emancipatory" research (Kushner & Marrow, 2003), and the co-creation of knowledge production.

Whether one supports the existence of a specific feminist methodology or one holds a feminist epistemology that is applied to a particular methodology as I have done, there are important commitments that underscore the variety of feminist research standpoints. Overall, feminist research is action-based and change-oriented as it strives to represent human diversity (Reinharz, 1992), prioritizes meaning that is drawn from the experiences of women, their perceptions of experiences, and life stories (Rothe, 1993), and integrates commitments including antiracism, diversity, democratic decision-making, and the empowerment of women (Mohajan,

2022, p. 52). In addition, I seek to problematize the ways in which socially constructed gender narratives negatively affect men and nonbinary identities. I maintained each of these elements of feminist research through my use of feminist constructivist grounded theory methodology for this study.

Aligned with Glaser and Strauss' original grounded theory, feminist grounded theory evolves throughout the research process, with emergent theory being produced from the continuous interplay between data collection, data analysis, and resulting theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Therefore, feminist grounded theory reinforces the priorities of both positivist and constructivist grounded theory and their rejection of more restricted methods of empirical research, and instead "takes on a more relaxed and open approach to gain a better understanding of social reality" (Mohojan, 2022, p. 53). The unique feature of feminist grounded theory is the particular attention paid to the power dynamics between dominant and oppressive groups (Creswell, 2007). By addressing various layers of intersectionality, including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, language, ability, and cultural identity, feminist researchers have produced multiple variations that interpret power dynamics based on one or more of these intersectional identities (Conrad, 2013; Risman, 2004). Feminist grounded theory and its ability to center the lived experiences and intersectional identities of research participants was particularly useful for my exploration of clergy women boundaries and psychological safety, in light of the highly prescribed gendered, racialized, and generational narratives with Protestant church culture.

Feminist Grounded Theory in Current Leadership Scholarship

Recent studies on gendered leadership and workplace dynamics have applied feminist epistemologies to constructivist grounded theory methodology (Fisher et al., 2010; MacIntosh et al., 2011; Roberts, 2022; Smith et al., 2019; Turnbull et al., 2023). The following discussion

outlines several recent grounded theory studies that deploy varying levels of feminist-critical discourse, applied through researcher positionality, methodological approach, and interpretive lenses. In her work on women seeking public school superintendency, Roberts (2022) included a thorough description of her positionality, insider status within the field of education, and overall feminist research stance in order to outline her intentional use of feminist grounded theory. Roberts also applied a feminist critique in her review of literature and sensitizing concepts in order to highlight current research on gender barriers in leadership, factors that contribute to women's success in the superintendency, and the under-researched topic of superintendent selection. Fisher et al. (2010) used feminist grounded theory to understand the gendered and emotionalized components of organizational commitment from the perspective of employees within university academia. The choice of feminist grounded theory as a methodology resulted from a critique of previous qualitative research on job commitment that used a predominantly male-centered psychological approach focused on performance appraisal and promotional opportunities. Fisher et al. also revealed important gendered layers of the notion of self-sacrifice as it relates to workplace commitment (p. 285), which had important implications for my research focus on women clergy in the hyper-sacrificial context of parish ministry.

Smith et al. (2019) employed constructivist grounded theory to their research on executive Black women and their experience of intersectional invisibility. However, the description of methodology did not include a direct reference to a feminist epistemology, despite the authors' use of gender and race-critical analyses of relevant literature and the phenomenon of "dual stigma" or "double jeopardy," as it relates to navigating multiple marginalized identities (p. 1710). The choice to not specifically declare a feminist epistemology is in contrast to researchers who explicitly state a feminist paradigm within their literature review and subsequent

study. This points to a researcher's unique decision-making choice whether to explicitly apply or disclose a feminist epistemology and/or formally acknowledge the use of feminist grounded theory. As illustrated by Smith et al. (2019), research can reflect a feminist paradigm without directly stating so, which is an important individual choice for researchers to make, especially those who are cognizant of the lack of race-critical awareness within White-centered feminist research and academic history. As a White researcher with a commitment to race-critical scholarship, I acknowledge that my choice in deliberately stating a feminist epistemology is fraught with the fact that earlier developments of feminist inquiry have disproportionately favored White women. As a result, my feminist outlook also compels me to problematize the disproportionately White composition of the participant pool in this study, which will be discussed further in the sections on study design and implications for future research.

MacIntosh et al. (2011) directly stated the use of feminist grounded theory in their research on how women promote their health amid experiences of workplace bullying. The choice of feminist grounded theory was explicitly justified noting that this methodology supports views that "participants are experts and their subjective experience is a source of valid data," as well as capturing the diversity and strengths in women's experiences (MacIntosh et al., 2011, p. 50; Wuest, 1995). Findings showed that there was a sharp disconnect between participants' self-perception as competent, capable, and ethical employees and the bullying behavior, often from a boss or superior, including "incivility, intimidation, manipulation, criticism, blame, deceit, exclusion, aggression, yelling, slamming doors, throwing objects, stomping, and being shaken" (p. 51). The resulting emotional, physical, financial, and social effects included "stress, anxiety, fear, powerlessness, decreased confidence, disrupted sleeping and eating patterns, headaches, gastrointestinal and cardiac problems, depression, and exacerbation of chronic

illnesses" (p. 52). The theory that emerged from the data revealed that (1) being bullied initially elicits feelings of uncertainty and dissonance, in which bullying behaviors are not readily labeled as such; and (2) women's ability to "manage disruption" is significantly delayed until they concretely identify the experiences as bullying. The study revealed a psychological protecting mechanism, whereby women employees downplayed workplace bullying behaviors in order to cope with, manage, and control an otherwise chaotic and toxic work environment.

The study conducted by MacIntosh et al. (2011) was extremely relevant to my research on women clergy psychological safety as it utilized a feminist grounded theory methodology in order to highlight the under-scrutinized dynamics of bullying of women employees. The illusive and often-hidden nature of bullying behaviors make them difficult to recognize and respond to, making this an appropriate research topic for grounded theory, with its capacity to uncover tacit, complex, and under-recognized phenomena. This important research revealed the harm of dominant understandings of workplace bullying as individually driven, as opposed to systemic and gender-based behaviors that demand concrete workplace advocacy and policy changes (p. 62). While this study emphasized supervisor-toward-employee bullying, the methodological and interpretive framework are applicable to the reverse dynamic in which women clergy are subjected to dehumanization and psychological abuse from congregants and denominational peers.

Methodological Fit

Based on the above-mentioned grounded theory research on gender and leadership and the methodological fit observed between constructivist grounded theory and EDI research (Holloway & Schwartz, 2018), feminist constructivist grounded theory was an appropriate choice of methodology for the study of Protestant clergy women boundaries and psychological

safety. This methodology has the potential to reveal the more tacit realities of gender-constructed boundaries and ingrained gender identity narratives, which have a direct impact on the psychological safety and well-being of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women. Moreover, the priority placed on participant expertise and knowledge of one's own experience enables grounded theory researchers to pay particular attention to more invisible social realities, thereby shedding light on under-scrutinized dynamics within complex and oppressive social systems.

The rigorous approach of constructivist grounded theory was appropriate for my research focus on women clergy boundaries and psychological safety, as it enabled both myself as the researcher and the research participants to delve into the highly complex power differentials and socio-cultural landscape within the context of Protestant parish ministry. Grounded theory is a useful methodology for studying human social engagement, as it explores beneath surface interactions that many obscure what is actually happening (Cooney, 2010). The focus on social process, social structure, and social interactions (Annells, 1997) was appropriate for a study on women clergy boundaries and psychological safety due to the highly tacit and subconscious ways in which women clergy are perceived within their ministerial contexts. Furthermore, the ability of grounded theory to move beyond mere description of circumstances to a sophisticated understanding of social dynamics and processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), made this a strong methodological choice for studying the interpersonal boundaries and psychological safety of women clergy.

The choice of feminist constructivist grounded theory also enabled me to incorporate my own feminist epistemology and research priorities, including my desire to (1) center women's experiences as a critical source of knowledge production; (2) emphasize research participants' experiences and perspectives as it relates to gender identity construction and gender-based power

differentials; and (3) problematize certain biases in related scholarship and promote a liberative and emancipatory form of research. Lastly, by utilizing a feminist critical lens to enhance constructivist grounded theory methodology, I was more equipped to emphasize "the reflexive challenge of representing others' voices and minimizing the researcher's voice and therefore her authority to represent 'the other'" (Allen, 2011, p. 40).

Addressing Researcher Positionality

I brought significant personal and professional background to the exploration of women clergy boundaries in terms of personal theory and practice wisdom, due to my own leadership experiences as an ordained Presbyterian clergy as well as legislative and political advocacy work with and for underserved women. I also carry important received theory due to my critical review of literature on mainline American Protestantism, embodied leadership and perception, and gendered construction of leadership boundaries, as outlined in Chapter II. Based on my relevant practice wisdom, received theory, and sensitizing concepts, I identified the need for more in-depth qualitative data and mid-level theory that explores the lived experiences of women clergy who have left active ministry due to violations of their own interpersonal boundaries and psychological safety. The gap in the larger body of research surrounding women's executive derailment (Bono et al., 2017) and the "glass cliff" phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007) as it relates to women's pastoral leadership, led me to utilize feminist constructivist grounded theory methodology for this study.

In light of my personal and professional background, I intentionally set aside my own assumptions and knowledge base within this grounded theory study, in order to prioritize emergent theory drawn from the data itself. Consistent with grounded theory research, I continually bracketed my own background and personal and received theories, formally

acknowledging and presenting this content in my positionality statement in Chapter I and the review of literature and sensitizing concepts outlined in Chapter II. Having stated this background, once the processes of data collection and interpretation began, I suspended this theoretical and experiential framework, to the extent it is possible, in order for my own perspective and the overall research process to remain as open and unfiltered as possible. In doing so, I sought to prioritize the experiences and meaning-making shared by the research participants and promote the participants' central role in knowledge production, which is consistent with my feminist epistemology and the foundational tenets of grounded theory methodology.

Study Design

This study explored the lived experiences of Gen-X/Millennial Protestant clergy women who have left active ministry due to concerns over their interpersonal and professional boundaries and psychological safety. The following discussion outlines this feminist constructivist grounded theory study, including purposeful sampling methods, criteria for selection, participant recruitment strategies, data generation methods, and the detailed coding and memoing involved in the constant comparative process. In addition, I include details on data analysis, data storage methods that protect participant anonymity, and ethical considerations used in this study.

Purposeful Sample and Participant Criteria

In order to understand the complex nature of a particular social process, grounded theory often utilizes what is known as a purposeful sample. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that a purposeful sample requires "all participants [to] have experience of the phenomenon being studied" (p. 157). This study included a purposeful sample of 20 participants (Creswell & Poth,

2018) who reflected specific criteria relevant to the study (Daniel, 2012). The following criteria are supported by a rationale for why such factors were important in this study:

- **Women Clergy:** Participants must self-identify as women. Based on the demographics of mainline Protestant denominations, the majority of the participants were cis-gender and heterosexual. While a few denominations represented in this research, including the PC(U.S.A.) and the Episcopal Church, have approved the ordination of individuals regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation, current demographics continue to lean heavily toward cis-gender heterosexual clergy, a persistent disparity that is addressed further in this research.
- **Ordained in a Mainline Protestant Denomination:** Participants must be ordained in mainline Protestant denominations where women's ordination is well-established. Such Protestant denominations have historical roots in the European Protestant Reformation and include the United Methodist Church (UMC), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Presbyterian Church (PC-USA), Episcopal Church, American Baptist Church (ABC-USA), United Church of Christ (UCC), and Christian Church Disciples of Christ (DOC; Burnett, 2017). This criterion precluded conservative branches such as nondenominational, Pentecostal, and Evangelical traditions including the Southern Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church of America, where women's ordination is formally resisted and/or rejected based on beliefs in biblical literalism. By focusing on mainline Protestantism where women's ordination is firmly established, I sought to identify the more tacit forms of engrained gender expectations that have significant impact on the psychological safety of women clergy.

- **Generation-X/Millennial:** This study focused on women clergy who have recently left active ministry in early to mid-career stages, as opposed to those who have had long-term vocations in active ministry. The most recent study regarding ordination age in the PC(U.S.A.) identified the average age of women's ordination as being 40.6 years (Hope, 2018). Therefore, this study focused on women clergy who were roughly between the ages of 30 and 50, in order to capture both those who entered the ministry at a younger-than-average age (ages 30–40), as well as those who may have entered the ministry later than average (ages 41–50) and who are still relatively early in their pastoral career.
- **Left active ministry because they felt their own interpersonal boundaries and psychological safety were threatened:** This criterion referred to those clergy who resigned from a pastoral position and/or left active ministry due to concerns over their self-determined interpersonal, physical, and/or professional boundaries. This precluded clergy who voluntarily resigned from pastorates due to psychologically neutral conditions such as positive career changes, desire to re-locate, serving lengthy pastorates, and health or family related reasons.
- **Out of pastoral position for at least six months:** This timeframe was specified in order to include clergy who were at least six months removed from their resignation or dismissal. This timeframe was intended to minimize any re-traumatization of women clergy as they participated in the study (Isobel, 2021). The time period of six months was meant to enhance the participants' ability to critically reflect on their own experience, as opposed to still being in the midst of intense emotional turmoil. This timeframe was also close enough to the events that lead to a participant's departure

that she was not de-sensitized or unable to recall specifics related to her experience. The determination of this timeframe will be discussed further in the following section on ethical considerations.

- **Available contact information for a therapist or counselor**. Participants were required to have available, if needed, the contact information of a therapist or counselor. Rather than provide a general hot-line number or counseling service, I felt it was important for each of the participants to already be in relationship with a trusted mental health professional, due to the unique elements of church-based trauma and congregational conflict. This criterion will be discussed further in the following section on ethical considerations.

Recruitment Strategy

Based on my positionality as a 40-year-old White woman clergy ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), my primary access to participants was through the professional organization Young Clergy Women International (YCWI) and denominational networks through the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A). Both of these organizations have several operating Facebook communities accessible either via a public page or private membership group, through which I actively recruited participants for this study. The groups affiliated with YCWI were most effective in providing denominational and regional diversity among participants, as this international organization includes 2,500 members and alumnae from Protestant denominations that ordain women clergy. The majority of the research participants were drawn from two private Facebook communities within the larger network of YCWI active members and alumnae. My general description of the private Facebook groups in this discussion is meant to further protect the anonymity of research participants. At the time of this study, the age demographic of these

Facebook communities was predominantly Millennial and Gen-X clergy women, due to the fact that membership of YCWI includes clergy women under age 40, with YCW Alumnae including women in their early forties to late fifties. The participants in this study ranged in age from 28–54, with the majority of participants being ages 41–47 and being on the cusp of Millennial and Gen X generations. This age range included both clergy women who had been in ministry for many years, as well as those who entered the ministry later in their careers. Additional demographic information is shared in Chapter IV. The disproportionately White membership of these Facebook communities necessitated more focused recruitment strategies in order to reach clergy Women of Color, which will be discussed further below.

My recruitment of participants included several steps, detailed in Appendices B–H. The first point of contact with potential participants was a post in the above-mentioned Facebook groups outlining the research topic, timeline, criteria for participants, and contact information. Interested participants responded privately through the Facebook messaging platform or via direct email. I responded to potential participants with an introductory email offering further background on the study, followed by a formal invitation to participate in the study including an informed consent form and brief demographic survey. Upon receipt of the signed consent form, I responded with an email confirming participation, outlining logistics, and providing details on scheduling the Zoom interview. After conducting two phases of recruitment through these channels, I found overwhelming interest in this research and the desire among clergy women to participate in this study. This ease of recruitment further alerted me to the timeliness and relevance of this topic, which will be discussed further in Chapter V's implications for future research.

Due to the historically segregated nature of mainline American Protestantism and the prevailing White male heteronormativity of Protestant pastoral leadership (Bendroth, 2022), there was a larger pool of White women clergy in the age demographic of this study. This was reinforced by the predominantly White demographics of the above-listed Protestant clergy women networks. In order to promote racial diversity and balanced representation within the participant pool, I contacted three Black clergy women colleagues who had noted a willingness to assist with recruitment through various networking channels. One of these colleagues alerted me to the possibility that there may be a hesitancy among Black clergy women to participate in an interview with a White researcher, considering the historical misappropriation of the experiences of People of Color by White researchers. This echoed my own personal concerns, however I also felt it was important to validate each potential participants' own decision-making rather than assuming discomfort or concern. Unfortunately, I did not receive any interested participants through the above-mentioned channels and shifted toward focusing on conducting interviews with the 15 White clergy women I had already recruited.

As I began conducting interviews and coding data, I continued to discern pathways to engage clergy Women of Color. I reached out to the administrators of a Methodist clergy women Facebook group, knowing that the United Methodist Church and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church have a greater proportion of Black clergy women compared to the historically White representation of YCWI and other mainline Protestant denominations. Unfortunately, the administrators of the Methodist clergy women Facebook group stated that the membership guidelines are exclusively Methodist clergy and I was unable to post my recruitment message. It was at this point that I felt discouraged and wondered whether my positionality as a White

researcher with Presbyterian affiliation would ultimately limit my ability to recruit clergy Women of Color.

As I continued to conduct interviews with White clergy and code the interview data, I became increasingly concerned about the lack of racial diversity within the participant pool. While the data revealed other forms of intersectionality, including gender identity and sexual orientation, I knew the exclusively White composition of the participant pool would compromise important discussions on intersectionality, and transferability within communities of color in both religious and non-religious contexts. Guided by my commitment to race-critical feminist research, I began a second stage of focused recruitment including a post within YCWI Alumna and PC(U.S.A) Facebook groups and a parallel LinkedIn post (see Appendix C), specifically recruiting clergy Women of Color. My hope was that this specific recruitment message within YCWI would encourage members to cross-post or share in adjacent clergy networks. In addition, I shared the post in the Facebook group of a racially diverse Protestant seminary, which has a membership of 648, including a significant number of Black and Asian-American clergy women serving denominations with an established history women's ordination. As a result of this specific recruitment strategy, two Black clergy women participated in the study and shared significant experiences that enhanced the depth and scope of this research. Chapter V will include further discussion on the need for future research that more adequately centers the experiences of clergy Women of Color as well as nonbinary clergy.

Data Gathering Method and Theoretical Questioning

In contrast to a positivist approach, which assumes an objective truth, constructivist grounded theory involves naturalist researchers who are open to the multiplicity of meaning, knowledge, and understanding. As Rubin and Rubin (2012) noted, in naturalist research, "the

researchers themselves become the data-gathering instrument whose skills in listening, observing, and understanding are crucial" (p. 3). This naturalist approach sees the multi-faceted perspectives of both the researcher and the individual(s) being researched. Within this naturalist-interpretive paradigm, I applied a responsive interviewing method which Rubin and Rubin identify as having three central characteristics. These characteristics include an acknowledgement of the humanity of both the interviewer and the interviewee, a desire to reveal depth, rather than breadth, of understanding, and a flexible approach to research that can be altered throughout the project. These foundational principles of responsive interviewing were especially critical during my early data collection process, as I found myself needing to more intentionally bracket my assumptions and experiences in order to avoid overly theoretical questioning. As I became more adept at responsive interviewing, I applied the participants' own language more consistently when phrasing follow-up questions, which further prioritized the meaning-making processes of the participants in order to draw out more in-depth sharing and emergent theory.

This responsive interviewing method was further refined by recommended grounded theory interviewing techniques. Birks and Mills (2015) noted that while interviewing techniques within grounded theory reflect those used in other qualitative research studies, more nuanced interviewing approaches are needed when the researcher's intention is to generate theory from the received data. Moreover, researchers who use interviewing in their respective professions, such as healthcare, counseling, and marketing, should not assume that their ease and familiarity with interviewing will automatically achieve the specific interviewing aims of grounded theory research (p. 72). This was an important insight for me due to my background in counseling and pastoral ministry, and my relative comfort with the interview process. While this prior

experience was helpful in cultivating trust and promoting psychological safety within my previous professions, such background alone is not sufficient for preparing individuals to conduct in-depth interviews in the context of grounded theory research.

Conducting interviews for grounded theory research compels the researcher to do more than merely support the emotional journey of the interviewee. The researcher must remain attuned to the sharing at hand, "being theoretically sensitive to what this means for developing theory" (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 73). There is a balance between utilizing an unstructured interview in order to enable the greatest depth of sharing, while at the same time avoiding either a passive interview process in which the researcher simply sits back and records, or a forced interview in which the participant's responses are restricted by the researcher's question or preconceived ideas. In order to maintain the intent of grounded theory research to draw emergent theory from the data itself, researchers must avoid forcing data to reflect previously held theory or categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, interviewing within grounded theory research challenges researchers to offer mindful and open-ended questions that prioritize participant meaning-making, as opposed to overly specific or directive questions that may result in response bias (Charmaz, 2001). An interviewer's questions and interviewing style can both force and reveal data, depending on the ways in which the questions are asked, the language used, the placement of emphasis, and overall pacing, which shape the context and content of the study. Charmaz (2001) offers the following important reminder:

> The interviewer can give full attention to what the participant wants to tell even when it seems extraneous or requires additional visits. And the interviewer can pace the interview to fit the participant's needs first. During data collection, then, participants take precedence. During analysis and presentation of the data, the emerging grounded theory takes precedence. (p. 691)

With this in mind, I was aware of the need to constantly reflect throughout the interview process, observing whether the nature of my questions was helping or hindering the participant from communicating her own lived experience. The line of questioning within a constructivist approach is significantly different from that of an objectivist or positivist approach. As Charmaz (2001) noted:

> A constructivist would emphasize the participant's definitions of terms, situations, and events and try to tap the participant's assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules. An objectivist would be concerned with obtaining accurate information about chronology, events, settings, and behaviors. (p. 681)

These divergent approaches reflect the underlying differences between Glaser's (1998) positivist approach and Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constructivist approach to grounded theory.

Having established the specific interviewing philosophy associated with constructivist grounded theory, the following discussion outlines my decisions regarding the leading question and intermediary questions. Through the completion of a preliminary practice interview, I revised both the opening question and intermediary questions in order to be more consistent with the epistemology of constructivist grounded theory, which prioritizes the meaning-making processes of the participant. Charmaz (2014) noted that a central tenant of grounded theory is the ongoing theoretical adjustments that occur during the data generation phase of the study. During my preliminary practice interview with a woman clergy, I initially led with the question "What did you not like about being a pastor or what did you not like about your previous pastoral leadership experience?" While this question elicited extremely deep and insightful sharing, it applied binary distinctions such as "like/dislike" or "good/bad," which made assumptions about a participant's experience. As a result, I changed my opening question to the more open-ended, non-dualistic question, "What has been your experience as a young clergy woman?" This alternative question broadened the participants' own comparative lens beyond "like" or "dislike"

and, at the same time, increased the specificity of the participants experiences of being a woman within their leadership context.

Within the practice interview I offered two intermediary questions: "Describe any moments in which you felt uncomfortable, anxious, or uncertain in your role as a pastor?" and, "Could you tell me about your thoughts and feelings when you felt uncomfortable with a parishioner?" I changed these intermediary questions to "When have you felt unsafe or uncomfortable in your role as a clergy woman?" This more specific reference to psychological safety was intended to bring to mind those experiences that were beyond the typical feelings of overwhelm, anxiety, and stress associated with the work of pastoral ministry, and instead elicit the kinds of embodied experiences that led to the participant's decision to leave a pastoral call or active ministry.

Throughout the interview process there were also opportunities to draw upon the specific language used by the participant, as well as ask such follow-up questions as "Could you tell me more about that?" or, "How did that make you feel?" Such follow-up questions prioritized the unique language and perspective of the participants, which is an important element of grounded theory research. In addition, asking about felt experiences drew out extremely embodied and nuanced responses, which reflects the discussion on embodied leadership in Chapter II. Further elements of the participants' embodied awareness will be discussed in Chapter V. Significant sharing around leadership strengths in early interviews compelled me to apply theoretical sensitivity to the subsequent interviews, in which I asked each participant to describe or elaborate further on her own understanding of her approach to leadership. This decision was made in collaboration with my methodologist following the seventh interview. The implications of this sharing will be discussed further in Chapters IV and V.

While interviews were generally around 75 minutes, a few interviews went longer, as well as one of the participants requesting a 20-minute follow-up interview to add an important experience that she hadn't shared in the initial interview. A few of the participants paused during their interviews, due to feelings of emotional stress, but were willing to continue sharing after a few minutes. Further discussion on participant psychological safety and well-being is included below under ethical considerations. When the interview reached a logical ending point, I offered the closing question, "Is there anything else that you would like to share?" I then ended the interview with my appreciation for the participant's sharing, a reminder of the importance of seeking support from a mental health professional as the participant continues to process their experience, and logistics around approving the final transcript through a follow-up email.

Virtual Interview Platform, Transcription, and Data Storage

All interviews were held virtually via Zoom, which provided several advantages. First, conducting interviews on Zoom allowed convenience in terms of scheduling flexibility, particularly based on the fact that young women clergy who have left active ministry are often balancing multiple responsibilities including childcare, alternative employment, and/or ongoing job searches. In addition, due to the sensitivity of the interview content, those clergy who found alternative employment were able to participate in interviews after working hours and in the privacy of their own home. The Zoom platform also enabled participants throughout the country to be interviewed without costly travel. Finally, the Zoom format created a layer of "lived distance" (Cataldi, 1993) that may have enhanced participants' ability to share highly personal and/or traumatic experiences in ways that may have felt uncomfortable in the more immediate space of in-person sharing. On the other hand, it is also possible that the Zoom platform may have had the opposite effect, with participants feeling less comfortable sharing before a computer

screen. In order to further promote the psychological safety and well-being of all participants, I did not activate the audio or visual recording feature on Zoom.

All interviews were automatically transcribed through the Zoom transcription feature, which aided significantly in the later process of coding and data analysis. Once the transcription was transferred to a separate Word document, I cleaned the transcripts by reviewing the interview line-by-line and highlighting words or sections that were unclear. The cleaned transcript was then returned to the participant to cross-check, edit, and eventually approve. During the transcript cleaning process, I removed any unique identifiers, geographical locations, and any other words that might be used to identify participants. Participant names were removed and given a number, based on the chronological order of the interviews, and a pseudonym chosen by the participant, for example 001-Jess, 002-Jane. All files related to each participant were given the same nomenclature. The process of participants each choosing their own pseudonym was especially meaningful and edifying, as many of the participants selected names that were significant or symbolic for them, which they often noted in their approval of the final transcript. This intentional decision further reflected my feminist epistemology, as it centered the self-understood identities of the women participants. The transcript confirmation process involved each participant reviewing, editing, and ultimately approving the final transcript via email. All transcripts were saved on a password-protected external hard drive and in electronic folders labeled with the participant's chosen pseudonym and number.

Throughout the data collection process, I was mindful of the sensitive nature of the interview content and the need to protect anonymity as well as adequately store the data in a safe and secure manner. Attentiveness to data collection and storage methods is critical, and can often be overlooked in the research study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to enhance data

security, I utilized a back-up hard drive for my computer, should the data be damaged or lost due to computer errors. I also continually backed up the data at key points in the data collection process. To provide an organized timeline for scheduling interviews, cleaning, and coding transcripts, I created a spreadsheet where I recorded the participant number and stage in the process. This document was extremely useful as it kept the data collection process moving forward at a steady pace, while also allowing for occasional pauses based on scheduling needs. In addition to the above-mentioned data storage methods and organizational practices recommended by J. W. Creswell and Poth (2018), I used cloud-based storage in the software program Dedoose, designed specifically for qualitative data analysis. This program housed the participant transcripts, coding tree, memos, and additional analytical tools for data analysis. As part of the technical storage process, each transcript was named in numerical order with the participant's chosen pseudonym, as noted above. This process kept the identity of each participant anonymous, which also corresponded with the participant scheduling spreadsheet. The password protected login information on Dedoose was restricted to myself and my methodologist. Coding team members were given Word documents of anonymous transcripts and did not have access to the transcripts on Dedoose. In addition, the Dedoose software has several data storage protections and safety protocols outlined on its website at https://www.dedoose.com/home/features.

Memo-Writing Strategies

In grounded theory research, the development of emerging theory takes place through ongoing theoretical memoing. Birks and Mills (2015) argued that memo-writing should begin at the birth of the research question. Keeping detailed memos helps establish credibility and trustworthiness of the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Memos also offer justification for

complex research decisions and serve as an "audit trail" (Birks & Mills, 2015), which provides the breadcrumbs that support overall research trustworthiness. The use of memos also enables the researcher to clarify and refine one's thinking during the process of constant comparison, both between and within interviews. I found the memoing process to be quite natural for me, due to my lifelong practice of journaling, my background in legislative policy research, and the literary process of exegetical sermon preparation as an ordained clergy. This background has helped me to develop a keen observation of the thoughts, ideas, questions, and connections that surface as I navigate the text, situations, and relationships around me. My habitual and often spiritual practice of self-reflective writing promoted an extremely organic process throughout this study, which was exciting, energizing, and at the same time emotionally grounding. I found the process of memoing to be a deeply embodied experience (Perry & Medina, 2015), as it promoted a feeling of synthesis, integration, and wholeness within myself as well as my relationship to the research.

For this study, I applied three primary memo-writing approaches, each enabling varying degrees of flexibility and creativity as preliminary theory emerged. The central memo format was the use of a separate Word document in which I recorded thoughts and observations immediately following each interview, as well as following meetings with my methodologist and coding team. Memoing directly after an interview allowed me to record immediate feelings, associations, questions, and connections that arose during the interview as well as reminders for myself for future interviews. This Word document also housed additional memos that emerged when I was cleaning each interview, as this was the first instance when I read the transcript in full. This early memoing occurred before formal coding or memoing on the Dedoose coding software. When I was logistically unable to memo directly after the interview, I relied on a

second memo strategy of spontaneous note-taking in a physical journal that I kept at close hand throughout the study. In addition to quick memoing in the 24–48 hours following an interview, this journal became a site of more emotive or personal reflections of how I felt about the interviews. It was in this space that I was able shift from line-by-line coding to the first stages of theoretical coding, and derive early understandings of the larger social processes at play. The third form of memoing was applied directly in the Dedoose software and associated with line-by-line coding. While the first several interviews included this form of memoing, I eventually felt that the Dedoose platform restricted the free-flowing mental processing that I experienced in the other two forms of freestyle memo-writing. Therefore, I began to memo more exclusively in the compiled Word document for the remaining interviews. Over the course of conducting the twenty interviews, I recorded over 60 pages of memos in a variety of forms including technical reminders, reflections on the data gathering process, curiosities about participants' experiences, questions to share with my methodologist and coding team, freestyle journal entries, visual representations, and non-linear brainstorming.

Negotiating Researcher and Caregiving Roles

As a feminist researcher, I feel it is important to share the ways in which my identity as a work-from-home mother of young children influenced my memo-writing process. Due to the often invisibilized role of full-time caregivers and increased intensity of “role-juggling,” particularly during and immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic (Evans et al., 2024), I want to be intentionally transparent about this aspect of my research process. My hope is that such self-disclosure in my research process creates space for other researchers who may be in caregiver roles while also conducting emotionally demanding research (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018). Rather than compartmentalize these identities and responsibilities, I found helpful

strategies for integrating my role as the primary at-home parent of children ages eight, five and one. Moreover, I found these dual roles called upon me to engage in a deep sense of embodied awareness (Tantia, 2021), which supported my research process in ways that consciously tended to my own physical and emotional needs.

Within my duals roles as a primary at-home caregiver and full-time doctoral student, I moved between the three key memoing methods noted above, depending on the needs of my children, which varied significantly depending on the time of day. I often conducted interviews and completed preliminary memoing from 10:00 a.m. to noon, during my one-year-old son's morning nap. While this was a consistent time window throughout much of the data collection and analysis process, I would immediately need to switch gears and put "pencils down" by noon in order to tend to my son for the next few hours. Unable to formally memo during this time, I would often take mental notes of how the interview felt, the energetic tone of the participant's sharing, as well as observe whether there was an overarching message or idea within the interview. My inability to write formal memos during this restricted time window invited a more macro analysis and felt-experience of the interview, rather than immediately addressing more specific cognitively observed elements. While I initially saw this time constraint as a limitation, it was in reality quite helpful in creating spaciousness immediately following the interview, which allowed a certain spiritual consciousness and embodied awareness to emerge (Tantia, 2021). I found these logistics of time and mental availability kept my own intellect and ego from reading into the participants' experiences and instead allowed me to focus on the more energetic exchange that happened during the 75-minute interview.

As the day unfolded following an interview, I had opportunities for handwritten journal memoing and what I refer to as "napkin notes," which engaged different levels of consciousness

that were helpful throughout the constant comparative process. I often brought my physical journal to my children's school pick-up line, arriving an hour early in order to get a good parking spot during the winter months. With my son in the back car seat, I would do my first stage of written memos, reflecting more specifically on the interview content. Once again, what initially may have been a constraint, became an ideal opportunity for reflective journaling during that one-hour window. Upon returning home with my older daughters, I would shift journal memoing to "napkin notes," where I would jot down words or quick connections that I wanted to follow-up on at a later time. This more spontaneous "popcorn" memoing was a particularly helpful method as it helped me identify half-formed thoughts without any pressure to formalize or label what was surfacing. These memos served as a kind of parking lot, where snippets of reflection could simmer or settle, before making their way into the compiled Word document.

Alongside these more unstructured methods of memoing, I had opportunities for formal electronic memoing at my desk, which often began during the first read-through of the interview for the purpose of cleaning and later returning to the participant for approval. While I was not formally coding at this time, I did make note of overarching observations, particularly surrounding the participants' body language, tone of voice, and general affect during specific points in the interview. This was also the first moment in which I would formally note whether something reflected elements of a previous interview, thus engaging constant comparative analysis. This ongoing memoing and constant comparative process was extremely organic, and evolved in productive ways alongside the caregiving needs of my children. I hope this sharing enables others with similar role-balancing realities to not feel alone, isolated, or invisible as they navigate their research process. As a feminist researcher, I seek to promote flexible research methods and strategies for researcher self-care within rigorous qualitative research

methodologies (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018), and acknowledge the emotional and logistical demands on researchers who are balancing complex caregiving responsibilities.

Coding Data and Coding Team

In grounded theory research, as soon as data is generated the process of constant comparison process begins (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, I began line-by-line coding shortly after initial data generation in the first few interviews. Throughout the coding process, it is important to maintain reflexivity and to code data in an *in vivo* manner, which captures the experiences of the participants in their own language (Holloway & Schwarz, 2018). By prioritizing the language, content, and lived experience of each research participant, I sought to minimize my own interpretative lens at this early stage of data collection. My interpretation of data was captured during the ongoing memoing process and constant comparison of data. To aid with the organization of codes and later data analysis, I used the online qualitative data software Dedoose. In preparation for this study, I attended a four-part Dedoose tutorial, which helped illustrate the ways in which coding "links together observations and information gathered" (Holloway & Schwarz, 2018, p. 514).

The process of constant comparison began as soon the first few interviews were conducted and data was generated through line-by-line coding and *in vivo* coding. During this phase, the data and resulting codes were continually refined as various concepts emerged (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). Within grounded theory research, this ongoing refinement and clustering of relatable codes is often referred to as axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Charmaz (2014) used the alternative term of "focused coding" to reflect this process of moving from the open or line-by-line coding to constructing broader conceptual categories. The Dedoose software assisted in this process by enabling me to assign to the data first-level *parent codes,*

which reflect focused coding, and subsequent second-level *child codes,* which refer back to more open line-by-line coding language. This process continued throughout the study as I further refined the codes through constant comparison within and between interviews. With each new interview, I returned to the previously coded data in order to clarify the codes as different concepts emerged (Holloway & Schwartz, 2018).

An important part of my coding process was the use of a coding team. It was especially important to have coding partners who were not directly familiar with the social context of Protestant church culture, as they were able to identify key features within the data that I may have taken for granted due to my background in ordained ministry. I was able to secure two individuals to serve on my coding team, both Antioch alumnae who conducted feminist grounded theory research on women in various leadership contexts. The coding team offered line-by-line *in vivo* coding for transcripts 001, 002, 003, 004, and 008, with each member working asynchronously on their own transcripts and meeting together twice to discuss coding choices during this early stage of data collection. This collaborative engagement enabled us to compare codes and add, remove, or refine codes as needed, which provided the basis for further comparative analysis as later interviews were conducted. The coding team also provided ongoing support and reconvened as needed to cross-check themes and categories that began to emerge from the data. This form of cross-checking is a critical piece within grounded theory as it maintains the reflexivity of the coding process and enables preliminary theory to emerge from the data, as opposed to forcing data to reflect previously held theory or categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I also regularly met with my methodologist throughout the data collection and constant comparative process, After the first six interviews, we determined there was no need for

theoretical sampling or adjustments to the primary lead question, as the data being collecting was extremely rich and sufficiently reflective of my original research question.

Analytical Methods

As data was collected through the interview process and interpreted through my own reflexivity and analytical memos, dimensions began to emerge from my engagement with the data. These micro-dimensions were identified and elaborated upon through ongoing memos as formulations developed, thereby tracking the development of theory as it evolved (Kools et al., 1996). These initial categories were strongly influenced by the participants' own language and experience (Charmaz, 2014). It was at this point that I drew upon my own positionality and feminist research stance as I began to build and interpret preliminary theory around the experiences shared across the interviews. There were points throughout this comparative process when I was called upon to reengage my personal and critical reflexivity, feminist epistemology, practice wisdom, and received theory drawn from my critical review of literature, all the while prioritizing the meaning-making processes of each of the research participants.

As the data was collected through the interview process and analyzed through constant comparison and coding, preliminary dimensions began to emerge. While it was tempting to begin more theoretical coding, I often found myself returning to *in vivo* coding in order to bracket my personal and received theories as well as resist premature application of sensitizing concepts. This was particularly true following the seventh interview, when I felt the need to apply the parent code of "scapegoating," under which I included numerous relevant *in vivo* codes. Upon examination of this parent code, my methodologist and I determined that it was too early to apply this parent code and instead separated the cluster of *in vivo* codes into two parent codes of "being blamed" and "becoming a target." This was an important coding choice as it

helped maintain the centrality of the participants' language and experiences, and separated out various elements of the scapegoating process into discrete developmental stages. The decision to delay the use of scapegoating as a dimension until more consistent data emerged also reinforced by personal research stance as a feminist researcher, committed to centering the language, voice, and lived experiences of the research participants.

I found the constant comparative process to be exciting and at times overwhelming, as there was broad diversity in the language used by the participants to describe similar yet unique perspectives. As the data generation process continued, particularly at the halfway point around the tenth and eleventh interview, I began to find the breadth of data and codes to be somewhat cumbersome on Dedoose. As the number of axial or line-by-line codes, subsequent parent codes, and emerging thematic codes became unwieldly, I decided to export the compiled codes to a separate Word document, so that I could more easily examine, clean, move, and readjust the code families, while also beginning the early stages of dimension analysis. These adjustments were then applied back to the evolving coding tree on the Dedoose software.

Dimensional Analysis and Saturation

As coding, memoing, and the constant comparison of data continued, I engaged in the process of dimensional analysis. Dimensional analysis provides a more detailed use of analytic tools and procedures within grounded theory, which enables the researcher to communicate about the analytic process with greater clarity and detail (Kools et al., 1996). The researcher interrogates the identified dimensions or coding families, considering each one as a potential central dimension or "organizing perspective." A central dimension is eventually selected, which provides "the most fruitful explanation of the phenomenon under consideration" (pp. 318–319). Following the identification of the central or organizing perspective, I then reintegrated the

remaining dimensions through the lens of the organizing perspective. As the data generation and constant comparison process continued, I engaged further with Dedoose as I organized and synthesized initial open codes and subsequent overarching parent codes. This refining and readjusting of code families caused me to revise the initial dimensions and continually adjust the evolving explanatory matrix until it more accurately captured the substantive theories that emerged from the data. This process continued until theoretical saturation was met, in which there was a consistent level of repetition in the data, concepts and dimensions, resulting in no further need to collect data (Charmaz, 2003; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Explanatory Matrix and Substantive Theory

The development of a comprehensive list of codes and primary dimensions supported the construction of an explanatory matrix. This matrix provided the central framework and structure of my research findings, enabling a more complete explanation of the theories eventually drawn from the data (Schatzman, 1991). Given the constant comparative nature of grounded theory, the use of an explanatory matrix provided me with a structure to compare data and the experiences of the participants (Kools et al., 1996). Holloway and Schwartz (2018) recommended flexible explanatory matrices that continually emerge from the data and noted that these matrices "provide the researcher with a conceptual structure to examine the relationship among the dimensions in relation to the context, conditions, processes, and consequences" (p. 519). The primary dimensions and explanatory matrix that emerged from this study are presented in the research findings in Chapter IV.

Ethical Considerations

- In order to ensure the ethical nature of this study, I thoroughly considered my overall study design and underwent a rigorous review through Antioch University's

Institutional Review Board (IRB). IRB approval promoted ethically grounded decisions within this study in an effort to reduce and/or prevent undue harm upon the research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As part of the IRB process, I identified several ethical considerations prior to the start of the study, including:

- Identify any possible or unintentional risks to individuals participating in the study
- Communicate clearly with the participants of the study, including the voluntary nature of participation
- Ensure that participants are fully informed of their rights regarding this study, including the right to withdraw at any time during the research
- Obtain informed consent prior to any and all interviews
- Require each participant to have an established relationship with and/or contact information for a counselor or mental health professional prior to participating in the study
- Require that participants are at least six months removed from their problematic ministry setting
- Include a preamble to be read prior to each interview noting that the participant is invited to share only what she feelings comfortable sharing and can end the interview at any time
- Apply researcher understanding and avoidance of potentially harmful questioning
- Include pseudonyms, chosen by each participant, and keep all identifying information anonymous

In preparing for this study, I was aware of the high level of vulnerability among potential research participants, based on my own background as a Presbyterian clergy who has left active

ministry. In addition, I was aware of the extreme psychological abuse experienced by Gen-X/Millennial clergy women, which was revealed during a prior pilot study I conducted as part of my earlier doctoral work. Based on this knowledge, I was mindful of the intense emotional impact of boundary violations within conflictual congregational life, which informed each of the women's decision to participate in this study. I was also aware of the deeply personal and spiritual sense of vocational calling that comes with entering the ministry and the resulting trauma of leaving the ministry under difficult circumstances. As revealed in my earlier pilot study, those who have felt compelled to leave or felt pushed out of their ministry contexts are often left with deep existential questioning and self-doubt regarding one's personal and professional identity. In addition, boundary violations and threats to psychological safety can result in reduced self-esteem, increased anxiety and depression, suicidal ideation, and other psychological impacts of physical, emotional, and religious trauma (Panchuk, 2018).

With these realities in mind, there was a potential psychological risk to research participants as they discussed their ministerial experiences. Therefore, as a trauma-informed researcher, I took stringent measures to provide a psychologically safe space for participant sharing. I clearly described the possible emotional impact with participants through the informed consent process. I considered providing a list of mental health resources to participants. However, I felt it was important for each participant to already have on hand at least one trusted counselor or mental health professional with whom they were already in relationship and whose contact information they had readily available. Therefore, I made this a criterion for participation, as it promoted a reliable form of emotional and psychological support before, during, and after the interview, if needed. Given the pronounced under-representation of young clergy women in high-level pastoral leadership positions, it was also imperative that I make

every possible effort to maintain the anonymity of each participant. As an ethically grounded researcher with strong feminist commitments, I continually reviewed standards of ethical research, particularly related to gender-based trauma, and reflected on my practices throughout this study. Finally, as I sought to promote the psychological and emotional well-being of the research participants through an ethically sound study, I also mirrored these efforts through my own intentional self-care practices (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018).

Trustworthiness

My background as a former Presbyterian clergy gave me keen awareness of the social construction of Protestant church culture and the ways in which embedded rules, roles, and interactions operate. This familiarity promoted rigorous qualitative inquiry as I was able to take into account the more nuanced and often subconscious relational, social, and organizational dynamics, which more empirical observation may not sufficiently capture (Coghlan, 2019). However, there were also elements of my insider status that could have influenced outcomes in unintentional ways. While my insider status may have afforded me greater acceptance and transparency among research participants, it also may have caused some participants to assume similarity and therefore share less detail and exposition of their ministerial experience. In addition, research membership and insider status may prioritize the researcher's experience over the participant's, with emphasis on commonalities and de-emphasis on discrepancies (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Therefore, what promotes trustworthiness in qualitative research is not necessarily the membership status of the researcher, but the ability to intentionally bracket one's assumptions. As Rose (1985) states, "There is no neutrality. There is only greater or less awareness of one's biases. And if you do not appreciate the force of what you're leaving out, you are not fully in command of what you're doing" (p. 77). Conscious awareness and bracketing of

my own biases as a former clergy familiar with congregational social dynamics, was a critically important part of my research journey as I sought to promote both rigor and trustworthiness in this study.

The primary elements of trustworthiness within naturalistic qualitative research include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). *Credibility* consists of "robust data that intrinsically supports itself and the findings" (Schwartz & Holloway, unpublished manuscript). I sought to uphold credibility through constant comparison of interview data until saturation was reached, as well as identifying and analyzing outlier incidents. *Transferability* is a process by which readers assess whether the findings of a study might apply to their own context. I promoted transferability through a detailed description of the research context and sensitizing concepts, as well as sharing my own researcher positionality statement. These elements encourage potential crossover discussion regarding the psychological safety of women leaders in professional contexts outside of Protestant congregational ministry. *Dependability* points to efforts of transparency including an "audit trail," (Guba, 1981, p. 87), in which I maintained an ongoing memoing process, with the support of a coding team and methodologist. Thorough documentation of my own interpretive processes was evident throughout data analysis, further promoting dependability in this study. This rigorous documentation process enables readers to track and understand the overall research pathway and subsequent decisions made throughout the study. *Confirmability* is the capacity for the researcher to balance their involvement and interpretations in order to prioritize the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's personal theories. I promoted confirmability in this study by identifying my underlying epistemological assumptions surrounding this study, as outlined in my positionality statement. In order to highlight

participants' perspectives, which is a primary feature of grounded theory methodology, I acknowledged and bracketed my own assumptions through ongoing reflexivity (Rose, 1985).

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This study began with my desire to explore the lived experiences of Gen-X/Millennial Protestant clergy women who have left active ministry because they felt that their interpersonal and professional boundaries were violated or their physical and/or psychological safety was threatened. I underwent a critical review of literature that explored three primary areas including (1) the social context of women's pastoral leadership in mainline American Protestantism where women's ordination is well-established; (2) theories surrounding embodied leadership and perception; and (3) scholarship on the intersection of leadership boundaries and psychological safety. I applied feminist standpoint epistemology and feminist empiricism throughout my exploration of these thematic areas, which identified important aspects of the social construction of gender identity in the context of leadership. This preliminary research led to my identification of several sensitizing concepts, outlined in Chapter II, which provided a foundation but not determinant for this feminist constructivist grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2014).

Over the course of five months, I recruited and interviewed 20 women who represent a growing community of clergy women who have left a pastoral leadership position or active ministry altogether due to persistent violations of their interpersonal boundaries and ongoing threats to their psychological safety. I approached data saturation near the fifteenth interview and conducted five more interviews to determine that saturation had been met, as is recommended for grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2003). An additional 12 women expressed interest in participating in the study but were ultimately not interviewed because data saturation had been reached. The overwhelming interest in this research and the desire among clergy women to participate in this study alerted me to the timeliness and relevance of this topic, which will be discussed further in Chapter V's implications for future research. I also applied theoretical

sensitivity to later interview questions, as part of the grounded theory approach to interviewing, which are explained in detail in Chapter III and will be addressed further in this chapter. After the completion of data collection, I wrote over 60 pages of memos and recorded 280 pages of transcripts, which produced 2,019 codes that were applied to 2,086 excerpts, all of which represented the deeply layered experiences of women participants.

In this chapter, I seek to center the lived experiences of the women who participated in this study, honor their perspectives, engage their language and thought processes, and present the data that was generated as a result of dimensional analysis. As outlined in Chapter III, grounded theory moves beyond reporting of the data and applies rigorous approaches to data interpretation such as dimensional analysis, which provides greater clarity during the analytic process (Kools et al., 1996). It was through this complex iterative process that the raw data and coded interviews evolved into core and primary dimensions, conceptual categories, and social processes, which are described in the explanatory matrix below (see Figure 4.2 and Table 4.1). The following discussion will describe the explanatory matrix through in-depth, concept-by-concept sequential progression, in order to capture the patterns, themes, and overall shape of the findings as described by the participants. Prior to unpacking the explanatory matrix, I will first highlight the demographic data of the women who participated in this study.

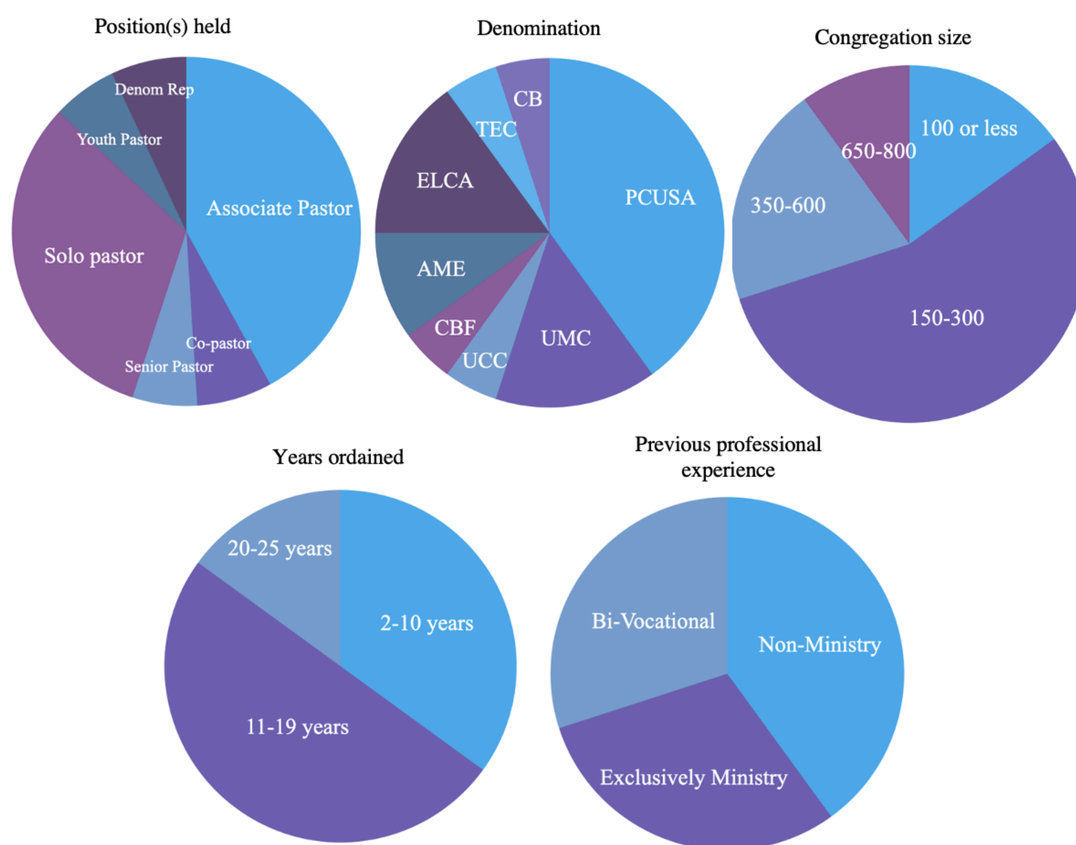
Demographic Data

As noted in Chapter III, I included a demographic survey as part of the informed consent process. I was interested in developing a purposeful sample that would capture both the specificity of participant criteria outlined in my study design, as well as allow for diversity and representation within the intersectional identities and demographic details of each participant. The 20 women who participated in this study represented eight different mainline Protestant

denominations, covering geographic areas predominantly in the Midwest, Pacific Northwest, Northeast, South, and Southeast, as well as two participants ordained within American denominations but pastoring churches in Canada and Europe. Ages ranged from 28–54, with the majority of participants being ages 41–47 and being on the cusp of Millennial and Gen X generations. Figure 4.1 outlines salient professional-related demographic data including pastoral position(s) held, denominational affiliation, congregation size, years ordained, and previous profession(s).

Figure 4.1

Aggregate Professional Demographic Data



Note: Denomination abbreviations include Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA), United Methodist Church (UMC), United Church of Christ (UCC), Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), The Episcopal Church (TEC), Church of the Brethren (CB)

In order to promote a diverse sample of participants, I gathered several personal demographics including participants' race and optional disclosure of sexual orientation and family composition. While the majority of the research participants are White and worked in historically White denominations, two women are Black and worked in historically Black denominations. Five women identify as LGBTQ+, with some noting that they had not fully disclosed their identities within their ministry contexts, which impacted their feelings of psychological safety and negotiation of certain gender role expectations. In order to protect confidentiality, I included all five women who held any LGBTQ+ identities in one category. Marital status and family composition varied significantly, including participants who were married, divorced, partnered, or single, with balanced representation between those with no children, young children, or adult children. These personal demographics are not represented in detailed graphics in order to further protect the anonymity of the research participants.

My desire to promote racial diversity within this study is outlined in detail in Chapter III in the section on recruitment strategies as well as my positionality statement in Chapter II. As noted, I was aware of the difficulty in recruiting clergy Women of Color due to my own identity as a White researcher from a predominantly White denomination with a history of white supremacy, as well as the highly segregated nature of current denominational clergy networking groups. Despite these challenges, I am grateful for the two Black clergy women who participated in this study, whose experiences were in some ways reflective of the White clergy women's experiences and in other ways pointed to the double consciousness of overlapping systems of gender and racial oppression. Of the 18 White clergy women, most worked within predominantly White congregations within historically White denominations, with some of the congregations having slightly more racial diversity. The Black clergy women worked within historically Black

denominations and pastored predominantly Black congregations. While the demographic survey captured additional details regarding the racial, economic, and socio-political demographics of each congregation, these details are not included in the above demographic data due to the highly specific nature of each congregation, as well as each participant having worked in multiple ministry settings. The specific details related to congregational composition are included in the research findings when participants noted their relevance to the social dynamics they experienced.

Also significant was the broad range of professional experiences prior to ordained ministry, which highlighted participants' exposure to different social dynamics, behaviors, and employment policies with which to compare their pastoral leadership experiences. Eight of the participants had non-ministry professions prior to entering ordained ministry, including the fields of art, law enforcement, human resources, and business management, among others. Of the remaining 12 participants, six participants had exclusively ministerial experience, including those who directly entered pastoral leadership as well as those who worked in chaplaincy, youth ministry, retreat center administration, and camp counseling. The remaining six participants who had prior ministry experience identified as being bi-vocational, having maintained part-time ministry work while also holding non-ministry positions often in the non-profit, social services, or education sectors. This range of professional experience proved to be significant as it alerted many of the participants to behaviors and social dynamics that were not experienced or tolerated in other professional contexts.

Dimensional Analysis

Drawing upon my background in movement and dance, I found dimensional analysis to be a form of choreography, in which there are distinct bodies moving in space, each with their

own internal rhythm and mapping, relating to a larger movement phrase. In the work of dimensional analysis, I saw each code and parent code as an individual moving body or group of bodies that informed and communicated with the larger external structure or dance. As I refined the coding tree during data generation and through the constant-comparative process, I intentionally observed how each body or code moved and communicated within the larger coding tree. My goal was to maintain enough distance from the initial line-by-line coding in order to allow the movement to develop on its own, much like the messy and spontaneous process of contact improvisation. Once in-vivo codes were established, I began to make conscious shifts and choices in code placement within the tree, as well as cleaning or clarifying the names and positions of larger parent codes. As I further refined the coding tree during comparative analysis with later interviews, larger themes and parent codes began to emerge and a more concrete shape or movement sequence began to form, which developed into the core and primary dimensions.

This creative process produced a total of 2,019 codes which were applied to 2,086 excerpts from interview transcripts, which I continually reflected upon through ongoing memoing and dialogue with my coding team and methodologist. My coding team was especially helpful in encouraging me to maintain in-vivo coding throughout the data gathering process, as I was often tempted to prematurely apply theoretical coding. As a result, I returned to earlier interviews to revise several codes in order to more directly reflect the participants' verbatim language. After ongoing memoing, reorganization of codes, and preliminary mental mapping, several initial themes emerged from the data. These were then revised during several phases, sometimes in short sittings where I addressed a particular parent code and its sub-codes, or longer sessions in which I reshaped the entire coding tree based on revised parent codes. The

process was deeply engaging, organic, and creative, as the interview content spoke to each other and to me through different layers of meaning. However, it was also emotionally overwhelming at times, as I processed intense language and identified powerful dimensions drawn from experiences of personal strife and relational harm. At the same time, several codes and dimensions emerged that reflected the participants' ability to recognize and reclaim their own agency within deeply oppressive social systems. As I present the detailed analysis of the following explanatory matrix, I have italicized the dimensions, conceptual categories, and social processes within the discussion in order to prioritize the distinct language and terminology that emerged throughout this process.

Explanatory Matrix

Following the above-described process of dimensional analysis, two co-core dimensions emerged from the data: (1) *experiencing feminized servanthood as dehumanizing;* and (2) *experiencing feminized servanthood as abusive.* Extending out from these co-core dimensions were five primary dimensions: (1) *developing a sense of call;* (2) *differentiating self from system;* (3) *exposing vs. protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems;* (4) *nail in the coffin;* and (5) *reconstituting self.* I will present each of these dimensions sequentially, revealing how each provided an added layer of meaning and experientially driven explanations as to "What *all* is involved here?" (Schatzman, 1991). It is important to note that while this explanatory matrix is somewhat chronological, following each participants' journey in, through, and beyond their ministry contexts, the reflections shared in each interview were often non-linear due to highly complex interactions, memories, experiences of trauma, and self-realizations that were shared. As a result of this more "navigational stance" (Roberts, 2022, p. 102), I have chosen to illustrate the findings in both a non-linear visual model noted in Figure 4.2 and a more linear explanatory

matrix noted in Table 4.1. Both illustrations include the co-core dimensions, primary dimensions, and corresponding conceptual categories, with the explanatory matrix in Table 4.1 including an additional level of social processes. Each visual representation also points to overall conditions, consequences, and opportunities, which provided helpful guideposts for organizing and analyzing data (Kools et al., 1996).

Figure 4.2

Explanatory Matrix (Non-Linear Representation)

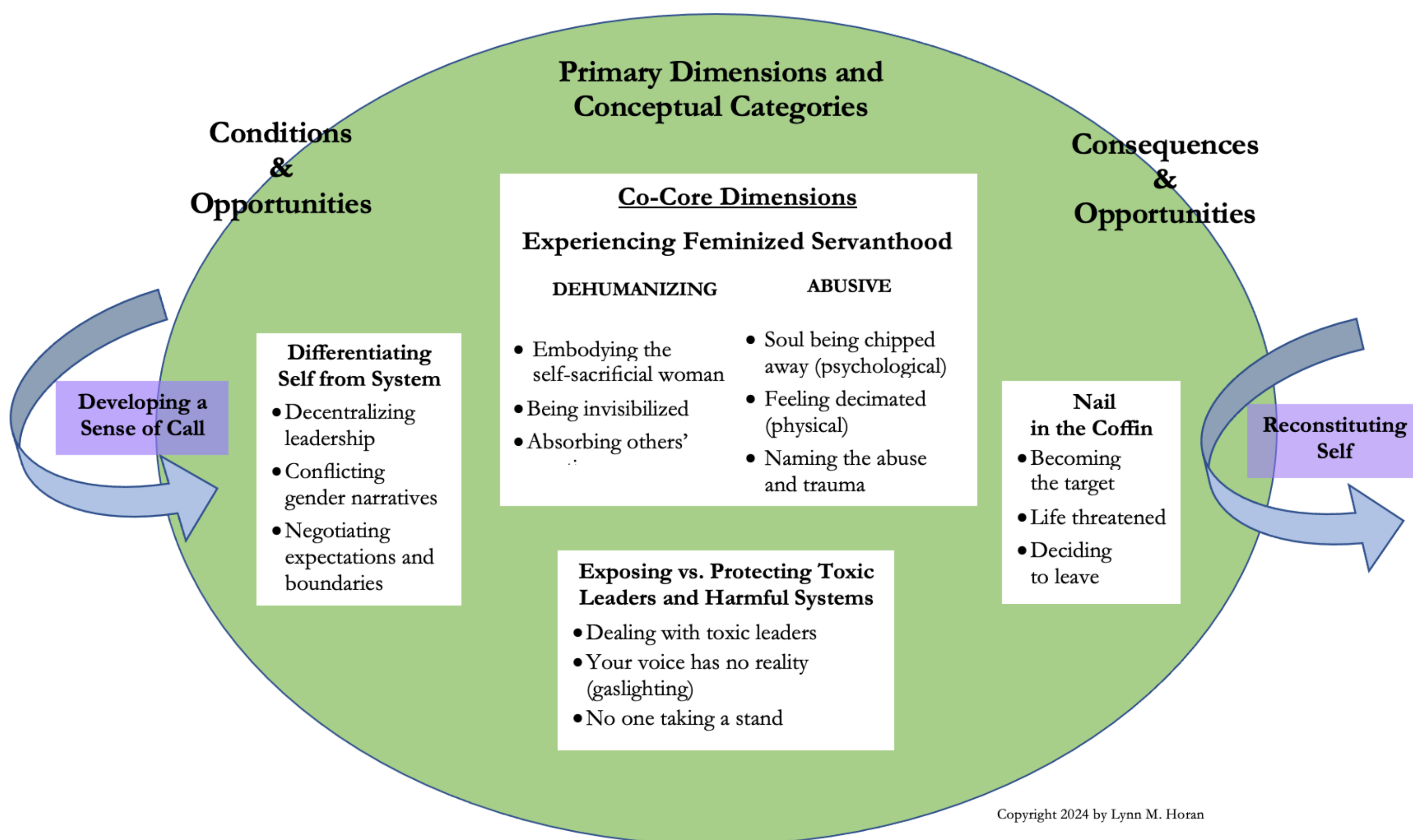


Table 4.1

Explanatory Matrix Including Social Processes (Linear Representation)

Co-Core Dimensions	**Conceptual Categories and Corresponding Social Processes**		
Experiencing feminized servanthood as dehumanizing	**Embodying the self-sacrificial woman** • People-pleasing, overfunctioning • Twisting myself into knots • Harmful humility	**Being invisibilized** • Not taking up space • Restricting voice, agency and authority • Shutting down opinions and ideas	**Absorbing others' emotions** • Holding others' discomfort • Shutting off my emotions • Being softest version of myself
Experiencing feminized servanthood as abusive	**Soul being chipped away (Psychological)** • Shocking and freezing • Feeling ripped to shreds • Punching bag for others' emotions	**Feeling decimated (Physical)** • Others needing to possess or control my body • No longer functioning • Just one death threat	**Naming the abuse and trauma** • Mirroring domestic violence • Love bombing and narcissistic abuse • Spiritual abuse
Primary Dimensions			
Developing a sense of call (Entering the system)	**Prepared and not prepared** • Not naïve coming in • Reluctant entry	**Finding myself in seminary** • Embracing a language of justice	**Losing myself in seminary** • Doors closing
Differentiating self from system	**Decentralizing leadership** • Equipping others and sharing power • Bringing people to the table • Meeting people where they are	**Conflicting gender narratives** • Gendered infantilizing • Mother-daughter wound • Disrupting masculinity	**Negotiating expectations & boundaries** • Porous boundaries • Buffering bullshit • Unspoken and double-bind expectations
Exposing and protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems	**Dealing with toxic leaders** • Toxic masculinity, throwing weight around • Internalized sexism • Others controlling/manipulating the narrative	**Your voice has no reality** • Gaslighting • Vortex of insanity • Thrown under the bus	**No one taking a stand** • Fed to the wolves • Dismissing sexual misconduct • Moral disalignment
Nail in the coffin	**Becoming the target** • Lightening rod • Scapegoating • Ousting the threat	**Life was threatened** • Not seen as human • Body taking me out • Staying will kill you	**Deciding to leave** • Vulnerability in betrayal • Throwing my hands up • Saving my life
Reconstituting self (Leaving the system)	**Metabolizing feelings** • Finding truth in emotions • Recovering from trauma • Letting go of guilt and shame	**Embodying uncertainty** • Questioning self and identity • Is the church good? • Healing takes time	**Remembering who I am** • Unlearning conditioned responses • Tending to what I want • Saving and liberating self

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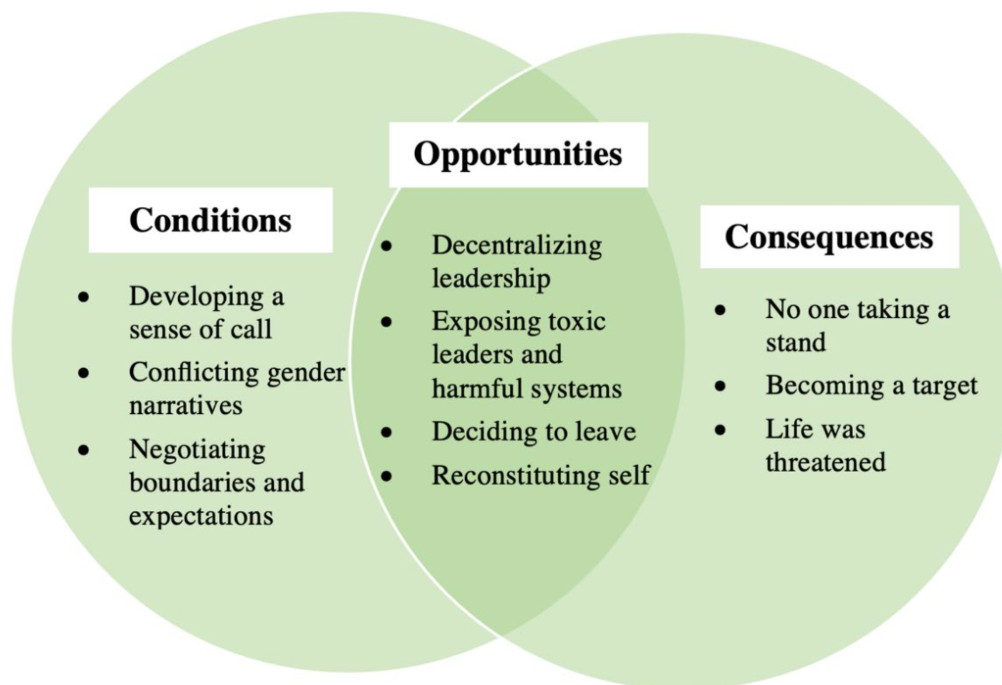
Conditions, Consequences, and Opportunities

Throughout the following discussion on the explanatory matrix, I have noted certain conditions and consequences exhibited in the various social processes that were identified (Kools et al., 1996). However, rather than delineate conditions and consequences within each specific dimension in the above matrix, the data revealed overarching conditions in the first set of primary dimensions and overarching consequences in the later set of primary dimensions, with considerable overlap between the two. Accompanying these conditions and consequences, I've added the term "opportunities" in order to capture the participants' agency, personal and professional choices, and conscious decision-making in their ministry contexts. The interpretive lenses of conditions, consequences, and opportunities provided chronological bookends to the co-core and primary dimensions, however it is important to understand their ongoing interplay as participants entered, navigated, and exited their ministry contexts, as noted in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3

Interplay of Conditions, Consequences, and Opportunities within Primary Dimensions and Conceptual Categories



Co-Core Dimensions: Experiencing Feminized Servanthood as Dehumanizing and Experiencing Feminized Servanthood as Abusive

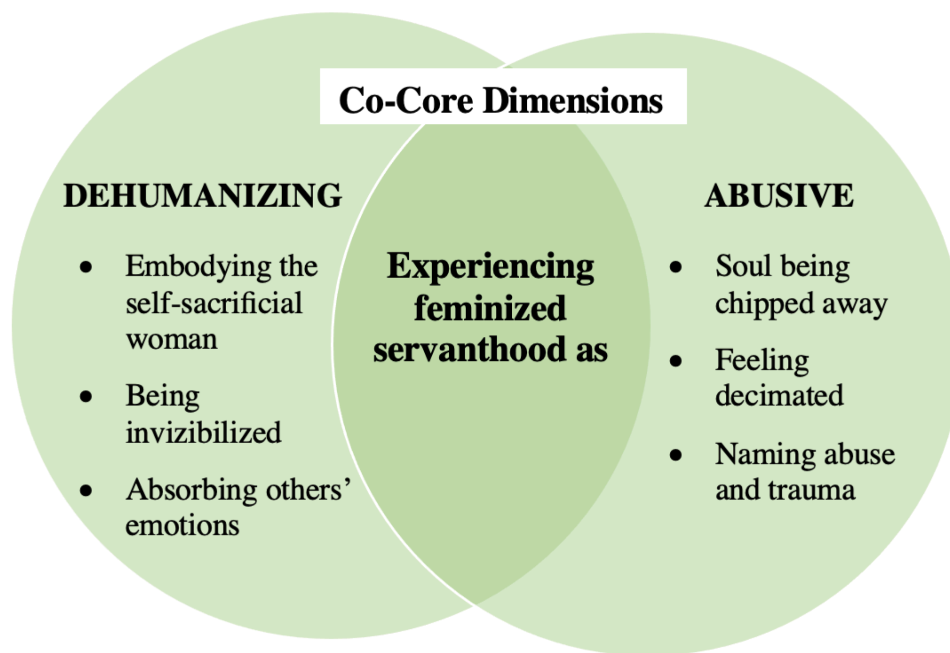
As I gathered, analyzed, and interpreted the data, I maintained a high level of reflexivity as a researcher, in order to avoid imposing my own interpretive lens, lived experience, and theoretical perspective. In doing so, I did not solidify core and primary dimensions until I had completed coding of all 20 interviews, along with comprehensive memoing, renaming of codes to more fully reflect participants' language, and reorganizing of the coding tree. As I proceeded with dimensional analysis and constructing the explanatory matrix, I initially identified a single core dimension of feminized servanthood with corresponding conceptual categories of feminized self-sacrifice and psychological abuse. However, I eventually realized that the categories of

gendered self-sacrifice and the lived experiences of psychological abuse were intricately related and mutually informed each other in ways that necessitated a core dimension to hold both. Schwartz and Holloway (2017) noted that interacting core dimensions “energize and connect the other dimensions but are also dependent on and interact with each other” (p. 42). The use of co-core dimensions created space for the complexity, weight, and nuances of the two interrelated dimensions, which might have been lost if assumed under a single core dimension.

In identifying the co-core dimensions of *experiencing feminized servanthood as dehumanizing* and *experiencing feminized servanthood as abusive*, I felt more equipped to illustrate the distinct social processes within each, while at the same time highlighting how the two co-core dimensions mutually reinforced one another in ways that produced more compounded outcomes and damaging consequences. The participants’ experiences reflected highly gendered understandings of serving others, which included both explicit and implicit messages from others within church and denominational systems. In addition, the women described their own social conditioning and internalized messages from within their own self-understanding, families of origin, overall faith journey, and personal understandings of pastoral leadership. These gendered understandings of faith-based service were intricately woven into the women’s experiences of psychological abuse by the surrounding church culture, both for those clergy women who internalized gendered expectations of self-sacrifice as well as those who resisted or questioned the gender narrative of the self-sacrificial woman. The participants’ experiences of feminized servanthood as both dehumanizing and abusive were the most salient of the dimensions that emerged from the data and have therefore been identified as the co-core dimensions of this study, along with six corresponding conceptual categories, as illustrated in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4

Co-Core Dimensions and Corresponding Conceptual Categories



First Co-Core Dimension: Experiencing Feminized Servanthood as Dehumanizing

The first co-core dimension of *experiencing feminized servanthood dehumanizing* emerged quickly within the data, often following the first opening question of, "What has been your experience as a young clergy woman?" This elicited experiences in which the participants felt or observed their identity as a woman informed the ways they were treated and perceived within their ministry contexts. Throughout the interviews, participants described in further detail various gendered expectations around their pastoral role, and ways of communicating and interacting with others, as well as reactivity from others when the women did not demonstrate and reflect the implicit or explicit gendered expectations. Additional social processes illustrated the ways in which expectations of gendered self-sacrifice were internalized by the women from other social spaces, including family of origin, marriage and intimate relationships, as well as

personal understandings of faith-based service. The social processes attached to the first core-dimension are those that had strong implications for psychological abuse, which will be further explored in the second co-core dimension. Overall, the clergy women described how both internal and external expectations of embodying the self-sacrificial woman strongly informed their experiences as pastoral leaders. Additional social processes related to gender role expectations will be discussed in the primary dimension of *differentiating self from system.* The following discussion outlines the conceptual categories of *embodying the self-sacrificial woman, being invisibilized,* and *absorbing others' emotions,* along with their corresponding social processes, as outlined in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

First Co-Core Dimension: Experiencing Feminized Servanthood as Dehumanizing

First Co-Core Dimension	Conceptual Categories and Corresponding Social Processes		
Experiencing Feminized Servanthood as Dehumanizing	**Embodying the Self-Sacrificial Woman** • People-pleasing and overfunctioning • Twisting myself into knots • Harmful humility	**Being Invisibilized** • Not taking up space • Restricting voice, agency and authority • Shutting down opinions and ideas	**Absorbing Others' Emotions** • Holding others' discomfort • Shutting off my emotions • Being softest version of myself

Conceptual Category: Embodying the Self-Sacrificial Woman

The conceptual category of *embodying the self-sacrificial woman* involved three primary social processes, each of which included both internal and external messages. These social processes included: *people-pleasing and overfunctioning, twisting myself into knots,* and *harmful humility,* which will be described in detail below.

Social Process: People-Pleasing and Overfunctioning

An important part of the conceptual category of *embodying the self-sacrificial woman* was the interplay between (1) external expectations placed upon the women within their ministry contexts; and (2) internalized messages and conditioning that the women absorbed from their families of origin, community, and/or religious upbringing. Rose shared an important observation of people-pleasing that developed during her childhood and which later fed into expectations of her pastoral role:

> Growing up I didn't have a great self-esteem. I didn't have a great sense of self love. So, I was always pouring out from an empty space for myself and giving whatever I had to someone else because then I had something to tap into that gave me value. I was always just pushing people forward behind the scenes but not realizing that I was letting go pieces of myself as I was people-pleasing.

Sarah described entering ordained ministry wanting to fulfill others' needs in order to validate her leadership as a woman. However, she felt this default approach ultimately challenged her ability to lead with integrity:

> I was such a people pleaser early in my ministry because I just wanted them to like me and think I was doing a good job. And I care that I do a good job and good ministry, but I feel less and less like that's for others to evaluate and more between me and God of how I'm showing up and how I'm doing the work. And am I doing it with integrity? Or am I doing it just to be liked?

Several women recalled both internal and external messages that reinforced gendered expectations of the self-sacrificial woman as a helper or peace-maker. Melanie discussed the relational dynamic of co-dependency in which her internalized role of the helper reinforced external expectations that she fulfill that role within her ministry context:

> I've worked hard on not letting people walk all over me. I was seeing a counselor and every time I told her a new story about a church member, she said, "I can't believe you have so many codependent people in your life." I think part of my own co-dependency comes from my family of origin, like my mom. To this day, the most value that she sees in herself is how much she can help other people. If she's helping someone else, she has

> value. If other people like her, she has value. That was modeled pretty strong for me in my life.

Sandra noted how she felt her own overfunctioning was both a necessity for the church's overall survival as well as a reflection of the church's preference for the male co-pastor, noting, "He kind of floated by and didn't do very much. The church wouldn't have functioned if I hadn't been there doing more. But he was the energetic face of the congregation and they really liked that." Jenny described her overfunctioning as a kind of performance that others consumed, noting, "Nobody would come alongside and support the ministry and so I ended up burning myself out trying to do everything by myself with people just standing back sort of watching."

Overfunctioning also came up consistently as a general job expectation, particularly for the women in associate pastor roles, where senior pastors (who were men in most but not all cases) would delegate an unrealistic amount of responsibilities. Vivienne described the idea of the "associate umbrella," which involved the ongoing tendency for senior pastors to off-load excessive responsibilities. This dynamic also included the gendered expectation of "cleaning up" or being the default person for various forms of damage control:

> It made me the bad guy in almost every scenario and people quickly came to dislike me. Not everyone, but it felt it was set up that way. He would wave to people and shake their hands and say "yes" and I'd come along and be like, "I'm sorry we do not have the budget for that" or "I'm sorry the building is already booked for that weekend." I was constantly apologizing and it almost became the stereotypical weird male and female roles because I was the woman apologizing behind him all of the time. It was a very bizarre setup. So, it was often the case that I was cleaning up after him. And I think emotionally some of the women who were being neglected on staff and then eventually shoved out had it very difficult and I, by default, became the person everyone called when it went south for them.

Rose observed a similar tendency for clergy women to be expected to "clean up" others' messes:

> I have often seen clergy women relegated to clean up a mess that a clergyman has created. We're always sent to fix it. We're always sent to rebuild it. Reshape it. Get the members back. You know, get ministries active again. And then as soon as that happens,

> we're moved. And we're moved to either fix once again another problem, another challenge.

Cora felt the gendered expectation of pleasing others and overfunctioning was reinforced by other clergy and denominational leaders who conveyed the message of "winning them over":

> Of the four churches that I've served, there was always a contingent that I connected with and there was always a contingent that had really strong negative feelings. So that was present everywhere I went. I was told that was "normal." That, if I was faithful, if I loved them, if I ignored the bad behavior than I would win them over. I just had to show them that, you know, having a young, single female pastor wasn't a bad thing. And if I did that, then, I would win them over. And of course, we know that occasionally that might happen with one or two people, but I don't think the system is set up for that.

Social Process: Twisting Myself into Knots

The persistent expectations of people-pleasing and overfunctioning operated both consciously and unconsciously and were informed by both internal and external messages. Over time, these gendered expectations began to wreak havoc on the women's physical and psychological well-being, which are reflected in the social process of *twisting myself into knots.* The following descriptions are understood in the larger context as consequences to the larger condition of gendered self-sacrifice, with some experiencing the impact more intensely than others. For some, like Miranda, the feeling of contorting oneself to fit others' expectations and fulfill others' needs was not so much an existential struggle as a frustration to which she eventual became accustomed:

> There's always this response to me and I am aware of it like this dance that I do inside. It's not even a struggle, it's just people initially always respond to me this way until they get used to me, until they get to know me and then it's okay. I want to be really generous with people, because a lot of the behavior will start to die down after a while. And then people get to know me and they're just like, "Oh! You DO know what you're talking about. Oh wow, you just saw me through a really hard time." It still feels kind of exceptional, like you're the exception, like we didn't like female priests, but you're the exception. Or we didn't like a gay priest, but you're the exception, the exceptional priest.

Haley, described similar experiences of receiving critical feedback, in which she felt like she needed to "twist myself into knots" in order to communicate effectively within a toxic ministry context:

> It was as if I am somehow defective because I cannot effectively communicate my ideas with these people. Communication is so much of what we do as pastors and it is a skill set that has to be learned and developed. You have to take feedback about whether or not it's effectively getting across to someone. I was always trying to take that feedback in and improve, but at some point my therapist said, "It's not that you can't clearly communicate your ideas. It's they just can't, they can't hear that." And I have gotten tired of twisting myself into knots to get someone to work with me as a leader when they don't want to.

Social Process: Harmful Humility

As each of the women described both the psychological and physical impact of embodying the self-sacrificial woman in each of their ministry contexts, there were internal conversations that informed the women's experiences. The women would often recognize the unsustainability of certain expectations yet ultimately override those concerns with a strong sense of purpose or calling within their ministry context. The minimizing, tolerating, and overriding that took place was often derived from unhealthy understandings and theologies of humility that the women had absorbed both within and beyond their ministry contexts, with messages and expectations that were internal to their own self-understanding as well as explicitly communicated to them.

Deborah offered a powerful description of a particularly feminized form of faith-based service and what it felt like to "choose humility in an unhealthy way." In this description, she also foreshadowed certain life-threatening consequences that will be discussed further in the co-core dimension of f*eminized servanthood as abusive*:

> In the denomination there's a really strong insistence that leaders are servant leaders. And so we have a real ambiguous understanding and relationship with power in any sense. And if you're a woman in leadership, that's doubled down on. If you're gonna play up here with the big players and you're a woman, then you better be humble about it, right?

> The women who have persevered and continued their careers in ministry are women who choose humility in an unhealthy way. And there's a huge cost to that. I've had three female colleagues who stayed in ministry long-term, each of whom have died of an exploded brain aneurism.

Cora described her seminary education as being instrumental in establishing unhealthy theological understandings of self-sacrifice and humility, which reinforced messages that she had received during her upbringing:

> I remember in the first semester my professors telling me, "We are tearing down everything that you think you believe that you were taught growing up, to rebuild your theology." And I think what they didn't tell me but what I experienced, was that it also stripped me down personally. And so it kind of exacerbated things that I already had going on personally.

Jenny experienced similar theological underpinnings of unhealthy humility and the expectation to fit into a kind of "mold," which ultimately caused her to "lose herself" in the process:

> In the church, I think I felt like I had to fit into some sort of mold. And if you don't think this way, then you're a heretic. When I was a full-time pastor, I felt like what the apostle Paul says, I was just "poured out like water." Just completely depleted. And you know, I heard stories about other pastors who were really supported by their congregation so that they could keep going and I felt like mine just kept trying to pull from me. In a time of prayer, the image I had of myself was in an ocean surrounded by the Holy Spirit in this bubble and fish and birds just trying to eat me. And that led to a lot of disappointment and a losing of myself.

Cindy described enduring suffering for the "sake of the call," which resulted in having to "take whatever people gave me" in ways that were deeply harmful psychologically:

> The message I heard in seminary was people are gonna treat you poorly and it's just the thing you should expect. That's just part of what being a pastor means, that people are gonna project on you and they're going to say things to you that aren't about you. It's about what's going on with them and you need to find ways to process that. The expectation was that it was my responsibility to be self-contained emotionally and to deal with everything myself and to just sort of take whatever people gave me. And that being treated badly was sometimes just part of the calling. I would never have phrased it this way, but I did sort of feel like suffering for Jesus was kind of the thing I'm supposed to do and that kind of martyrdom thing that I was taught was honorable and was just part of being called. So that's what I should expect.

While most of the participants noted both internal and external messages that reinforced unhealthy understandings of humility, there were others like Vivienne who did not profess a self-sacrificial theology, noting, “I do not profess a theology that requires me to suffer to become a better human. Yet I did experience darkness and I did wonder where Jesus was, often because it was such a difficult time.” Like Vivienne, Joanna did not base her leadership on a strong sacrificial theology, yet her understanding of leadership maintained high levels of humility and self-sacrifice that manifested in intense anxiety and wishing “her body would cooperate”:

> The panic attacks were just, you know, some people feel like, oh my gosh, they’re having a heart attack. My heart rate would just raise up to, you know, over 100 up to 130 And there was no stopping it from racing. I didn’t have to go to an emergency room but it was just this overwhelming heart rate and emotional experience. I said to a friend, “If my body would just cooperate, I could stay at this church.” And as soon as I said it, I heard what I said, I don’t need you to repeat that back. I got it loud and clear. So, the embodied experience is really, really damaging.

Conceptual Category: Being Invisibilized

Through the conceptual category of *being invisibilized,* the women shared a deeper layer of gendered self-sacrifice based on the women’s own social conditioning to “not take up space,” as well as others’ overt efforts to contain, silence, restrict, and/or reject the voices and agency of the clergy women. The concept of *being invisibilized* points to both a physical-spacial reality in which the women felt physically removed from decision-making spaces, as well as a socio-relational reality in which their contributions were ignored, denied, or minimized. These social processes are identified as *not taking up space, restricting voice, agency and authority,* and *shutting down opinions and ideas.*

Social Process: Not Taking Up Space

The process of *not taking up space* included both internalized messages that caused some women to try to “shrink themselves,” as well as external messages from others within the

ministry context to "not fully exist." As a solo pastor, Allegra noticed that "when I began to take up space, people didn't like that. Before it was 'Allegra is just so nice and she just didn't get in our way. And we just loved that. And now she's making decisions that are uncomfortable for me and I have to actually deal with her as a human being.'" Allegra also recalled being verbally attacked by a well-known male pastor at a denominational meeting, where she struggled between defending herself and surrendering to the power dynamics at play:

> I found myself standing my ground because I was trying to take up space because I've been trying to learn how to do that. In the same breath my body wanted to just run away. I did find myself saying, "Oh, ok, well, sorry you see it that way." But I'm so conditioned and if a male figure says something like this and gets in your face about it, then you need to back off and just don't make waves. Stop making waves.

Marta also used the language of not "taking up space," but from external messages and behaviors rather than internalized and conditioned messages within herself. When reflecting on the lack of acknowledgement and overt criticism of her ministry by the male senior pastor/head of staff in three different congregations, Marta noted:

> Instead of celebrating it and saying, golly, she's a phenomenal teacher, you should all go to her education class. Or look at this great pastoral care work that she's doing, let's encourage her to play to her strengths. Instead, I feel like from the heads of staff, it's just been how can we shut her down? How can we minimize her? Or let's not allow this woman to take up any of our space that we want to take up.

As a Black clergy woman working within an historically Black denomination, Rose's description of invisibilizing was informed by her understanding of misogynoir:

> I summarize misogynoir as a disdain for Black women and it goes a bit deeper than that. It misconstrues, misinterprets, misinforms people about the sacred text as it relates to women. Women tend to be unnamed. Women were caused harm through rape and abuse. Women are told to be silent. People interpret the Christian sacred text as women should not be pastors or leaders. So that then spills out into this term misogynoir where it is very dehumanizing and oppressive. It invisibilizes Black women and Black women aren't treated equitably in the leadership if the denomination.

Social Process: Restricting Voice, Agency, and Authority

Additional social processes were revealed whereby the women felt overt restriction of their ability to express themselves, make decisions, and assert pastoral authority that was well-within the purview of their positions as either associate pastors or senior pastors and heads of staff. Sandra described how transitions in pastoral leadership allowed her to see the stark contrast between working collaboratively with other leaders versus those who sought to silence and delegitimize her leadership:

> It was hostile. Quite openly hostile. On his first day on the job, people went to the new pastor and complained that I had just done this thing without them knowing or caring or understanding, even though it had been a project that had been spearheaded by the interim pastor that had left. And so the new pastor pulled me into his office within the first week of being there and reprimanded me for doing things that I wasn't allowed to do. From the very get-go, it was clear that he didn't trust me. He didn't ask me what happened. There was never a conversation. And so, I just kind of had to do my work in that uncertainty.

Christy, who was in her first ordained position as an associate pastor, was explicitly told by the female senior pastor, whose husband was a co-pastor with her, "You need to be subservient to us." This was shocking to Christy who had come from a family of pastors, both men and women. Christy also felt that when she shared specific knowledge that she had within a particular area of ministry and related decision-making, she felt that as a woman her assertiveness "came across as aggressive or as rigid," which was perceived as threatening by the older female senior pastor. Christy later understood the senior pastor's reactivity as stemming from narcissistic tendencies and a need to control narratives within the church, which will be discussed in the primary dimension of *exposing vs. protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems.*

The resistance toward voice, agency, and authority of each clergy woman came from multiple directions, including senior pastors, other church staff, and parishioners, regardless of gender. Joanna, a senior pastor and head of staff, expressed to an older female secretary that it

was inappropriate to work on personal projects during her allotted office hours, to which the woman "practically yelled at me saying 'I am not pausing on this!'" This confrontation ultimately set the stage for a larger staff-wide campaign to eliminate Joanna, which will be discussed further in the primary dimension *becoming a target.* Further discussion on intergenerational conflict between women will be addressed in the conceptual category of *conflicting gender narratives.*

Vivienne, an associate pastor, described being "relieved of certain duties," which removed her as the only woman represented on important decision-making committees within the church. She felt this was an overt abuse of power that eliminated much-needed checks and balances to the senior pastor and those who surrounded him:

> I was relieved of some duties because I was saying that my workload was tremendous and that I wasn't getting enough of time with my family. The duties that I was relieved from were executive committee and HR, which are the two most important checks to the senior pastor's power. I was the only other female presence on staff and I was the only other pastor in those meetings. So, when the senior pastor relieved me of those duties there was no one else checking that power.

Social Process: Shutting Down Opinions and Ideas

The women also experienced specific instances when their opinions or ideas were unwelcome, rejected, or only seen as valued when restated by another, usually male, pastor. Jenny, a senior pastor described the ways in which creative ideas were "smashed" and "shattered":

> When we had an associate pastor, he and I talked about not having the bandwidth to start anything new because pandemic ministry was exhausting. We were able to see how church could be done differently bringing in new people who are totally uninterested in the worship service but could build community in other ways. But then that was just smashed up against a wall and just shattered into a thousand pieces.

Kay, also a solo pastor, saw an opportunity for her congregation to receive coaching from a denominational training program. When the denomination asked for volunteer churches and clergy to participate in the training, Kay felt her idea was silenced:

> I almost fell out of my chair and raised my hand so hard and I was like, "Pick us!" I was not trying to be a woman alone on an island fixing this church. I knew we needed help. I knew there were dynamics at this church that I wasn't entirely picking up on. And we just needed some assistance. But I just felt like my voice wasn't being heard.

Melanie, a senior pastor who had followed a very dis-engaged male pastor, shared that church members were consistently surprised or frustrated that she had an opinion, particularly among older women who felt a sense of pride and ownership within certain ministry areas:

> There was an older woman and then somebody that was close with her, who I think were surprised that I had any opinions about anything when I came back from maternity leave. I went to meetings and I was like, "Here's what we can do as a church," and they answered "Well no, you're not letting us run it our way. Why do you have an opinion on anything?"

Hope wasn't surprised by some of the silencing she experienced, particularly in the southern context where she lived and worked. She both recognized and accepted the dynamic as something she wasn't going to be able to change, while other dynamics, which are described in the dimension *addressing toxic leaders and harmful systems,* became intolerable for her:

> I noticed right away some of the things you had to do. But this was in any workplace where when you're working with a male superior, you will bring up ideas and you get told they're not that great. And then two weeks later, they come into a meeting and they suddenly have this great idea that was your idea and you just go with it and you just kind of go, "Okay, whatever, as long as it's getting done, doesn't matter whose idea it was, blah blah blah."

Conceptual Category: Absorbing Others' Emotions

The conceptual category of *absorbing others' emotions* represented the women's increased concern over their emotional well-being and psychological safety, making this an important bridging piece to the second co-core dimension of *feminized servanthood as abusive.* This category was expressed through both absorbing the psychological impact of unhealthy emotional projection from others, as well as doing the emotional labor of navigating and deescalating highly charged relational spaces. The primary social processes that emerged from

this conceptual category were *holding others' discomfort, shutting off my emotions*, and *being the softest version of myself,* each of which led to deeply felt physical and psychological consequences for each of the women.

Social Process: Holding Others' Discomfort

The language of "absorbing others emotional labor" first emerged with Haley who described what it felt like to "perform femininity" through "agreeableness" and "smoothing things over":

> Part of it is a kind of agreeableness and endless energy for holding other people's social shit and smoothing things over and just taking on all the responsibility for the emotional labor in relationships when people weren't willing to do that. And that happened a lot, particularly with older men who just expected the woman in the room to make nice. My older clergy woman supervisor put the emotional labor on me of keeping that relationship running smoothly, when she was just actively trying to antagonize me.

When asked to describe the idea of "emotional labor" further, Haley offered an important description of what it means to "hold others' discomfort" within the context of racial justice work:

> One of my pastor colleagues, who is a young man of color, queer person, talks about centering People of Color and what that requires of White people in the congregation and spreading the discomfort around and making White people do some work too. And that made something go off in my brain because I hold so much of other people's discomfort and try and smooth it over.

Cindy also faced the expectation that she comfort others while they were actively mistreating her. When others felt she did not uphold that expectation, she was punished in the form of church members' silence or other church members' decisions to leave the congregation in protest:

> There was an expectation that I would not just take it but that my response to that would be particularly gentle and soft and non-confrontational. And the expectation was almost that I should make people feel better about being terrible to me. Like it was my responsibility to make them feel good about that or make them feel like they're still good people in the midst of it, which I just think is utter bullshit. I didn't fully buy into that, but

> it clearly was the expectation. And whenever I didn't do that, whenever I didn't respond that way, I was very clearly punished for it.

Sarah also experienced the expectation to bear the emotional burden of conflict and crisis within her church community. However, in her case there was an additional physical burden due to the intensity surrounding a very real and imminent death threat against her by a church member, which will be addressed further in the conceptual category *feeling decimated:*

> Nobody questioned, "Are you okay standing up front leading every week?" Instead, I got a panic button underneath the pulpit. There were times when I was like, I can't. I can't be upfront today. I had to ask for that. If I felt like I just couldn't lead from up front because it was too scary, I had to ask to not have to that week. It wasn't like, "What do we need to do to help support her in the midst of this crisis?" The entire church was in crisis, but I was bearing the emotional and physical burden of this.

Social Process: Shutting Off My Emotions

The clergy women also described the need to shut off their own emotions in the midst of conflict or disagreement. Cindy felt it was particularly dehumanizing to not be able to express anger as a woman:

> There were many times when I was responding to something that church members actually were saying to me and having legitimate emotional responses to people saying very cruel things to me. And not feeling allowed to tell them that they needed to stop, or that that was an inappropriate thing to say. I especially shut off any feelings of anger and the ability to express that to people in my churches. What I've realized is that Christian culture really doesn't want women in particular to express anger at all.

In addition to external expectations, Jenny felt that suppressing her emotions was further intensified by her understanding of self-worth and the narrative of the "good girl":

> People would treat me badly and I made excuses for them. I had a habit of giving people the benefit of the doubt and excusing their behavior without recognizing how it affected me. I wonder if this is related to the narrative that I have to be a "good girl." In that sense, if something went wrong, it must mean that I wasn't good enough, that I have to pivot to be good enough to make things better. I need to comfort or support this person even though it's negatively effectively me.

Social Process: Being the Softest Version of Myself

Cindy described the process of being the "softest version" of herself, related to the congregation's mis-treatment of a nonbinary pastoral assistant who had worked in the congregation for two years. Cindy carefully voiced her concerns with the congregation, which caused many to resent her for "shaming them":

> I was very careful to make sure to say it kindly and to try to be the softest version of myself as possible. I really worked at that. And yet people felt shamed by that and responded by just digging their heels in. Instead of addressing the problem they chose to just be angry at me for shaming them. And I couldn't recover from that. My impression of the congregation and my hope for church was shattered by that response and that's when I left.

Other women described the process of "accommodating others," which became psychologically damaging for those with previous experiences of PTSD. Jenny described the work of "accommodation" as eventually unsustainable when it brought to the surface the disregard in her previous pastoral call of her pain and trauma after having had a stillbirth:

> When the pandemic hit, for me all of the PTSD from the stillbirth came back and I was living that again. I could feel it. And there was a minister who insisted on getting married at the church even though everything was shutdown. I was still in the mode of accommodating people so I worked so hard to figure out what could be done. There was no compromising with them, no understanding that it just wasn't possible. I was also trying to figure out how to keep everyone connected, working seven days a week while the church board was just sitting at home. I couldn't handle it and I needed to go on a health leave but it was done in a very condescending way.

Each of the conceptual categories of *embodying the self-sacrificial woman, being invisibilized,* and *absorbing others' emotions*, contributed to the overarching co-core dimension of experiencing *feminized servanthood as dehumanizing.* The compounded effect of both internalized messages and external expectations created an extremely restricted space of existence for each of the women, in which their agency and overall humanity was compromised. The ongoing experience of living and leading within these harmful conditions led to acute

experiences of psychological stress and abuse, which will be outlined in the second co-core dimension of *experiencing feminized servanthood as abusive.*

Second Co-Core Dimension: Experiencing Feminized Servanthood as Abusive

The second co-core dimension, *experiencing feminized servanthood as abusive,* emerged more gradually throughout each interview, after the women had laid the framework for their *experiences of femininized servanthood as dehumanizing*. The women were able to endure certain elements of feminized servanthood while still exhibiting agency and important leadership choices, which will be further discussed in the primary dimension of *differentiating self from system*. However, as the clergy women moved further into their ministry experiences, social processes began to emerge that looked and felt like abuse, even if the women were not able to articulate that at the time. The experiences of abuse, whether verbal, emotional, or spiritual, were reinforced and enabled by the dehumanizing expectations of feminized servanthood as depicted in the first co-core dimension. The following discussion outlines the second co-core dimension of *experiencing feminized servanthood as abusive,* which is illustrated by the conceptual categories of *soul being chipped away (psychological), feeling decimated (physical),* and *naming the abuse and trauma,* along with their corresponding social processes (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3

Second Co-Core Dimension: Experiencing Feminized Servanthood as Abusive

Second Co-Core Dimension	Conceptual Categories and Corresponding Social Processes		
Experiencing Feminized Servanthood as Abusive	**Soul Being Chipped Away (psychological)** • Shocking and freezing • Feeling ripped to shreds • Punching bag for others' emotions	**Feeling Decimated (physical)** • Others needing to possess/control my body • No longer functioning • Just one death threat	**Naming the Abuse and Trauma** • Mirroring domestic violence • Love bombing and narcissistic abuse • Spiritual abuse

Conceptual Category: Soul Being Chipped Away (Psychological)

The following two conceptual categories of *soul being chipped away (psychological)* and *feeling decimated (physical)* include lengthy excerpts from a few key interviews, which incapsulate the intensity of the psychological and physical damage that each woman experienced. These incidents are not considered outliers, but are highly reflective of repeating patterns seen in each of the interviews and are supported by additional shorter excerpts.

Social Process: Shocking and Freezing

Joanna, a solo pastor and head of staff, experienced an inappropriate physical encounter with a male congregant that illustrated the feeling of "freezing," in which she felt stunned, surprised, and unable to process the incident in the moment. Her psychological safety was further compromised by the subsequent minimizing of the experience both by her own internalized messages and social conditioning as well as normalizing of the behavior from other staff members. She initially described the incident very briefly and without much detail:

> Yeah, not overwhelming, but not anything I would want for anyone. And that concept of him scanning the room to realize he had this opportunity was, you know, chilling. I kind of set it aside for a while mentally for a couple of weeks and then I realized there were still residual emotional effects of this.

When asked to describe what she felt in that moment, she noted the concept of "freezing" and her own internal thought process that served to minimize the experience:

> He found an opportunity where I was in a secluded area and it just had that, that kind of, power play vibe to it. He found a way to invade my personal space, and I froze. I'm 47 and I don't feel like I was taught much about freeze or fawn. I was taught fight or flight, so that never made sense to me when I didn't say something or respond in a way that I usually would. It felt very invasive but part of me thought I was kind of beyond that. There's probably times in my ministry where similar kinds of touch had happened early on and I honestly just normalized it as just mild sexual harassment. But as a grown woman in ministry I just, I was not at all prepared to have that experience.

Joanna felt her psychological safety was further compromised by the personnel committee's dismissal of the incident, saying "You're welcome to press charges but it's not our responsibility." She felt "up against a wall if she did anything," due to the fact the man was a prominent church member's son.

Joanna's experience highlighted several notable themes seen in other interviews including (1) placing sole responsibility on the pastor to address the concerns with the perpetrator; (2) the desire to protect prominent leaders and/or or members of the congregation; and (3) church leadership showing interest in the pastor's safety only if framed as a safety issue for the larger congregation. The primary dimension *differentiating self from system* will specifically address intergenerational conflict between young clergy women and older women within their ministry contexts regarding legitimate concerns of personal safety and sexual misconduct.

Social Process: Feeling Ripped to Shreds

Marta, an associate pastor serving in a multi-staff church, had a male senior pastor whose approach to leadership included intense verbal and psychological abuse, which left her feeling "torn up" and "ripped to shreds." Rather than be viewed as an outlier in terms of its intensity and specificity, the lengthy excerpt included below represents consistent themes found in other interviews, which will be discussed further below. The following encounter took place in the senior pastor's office in the presence of six other female church members who were critical of Marta's engagement with a summer youth program:

> So, I get into this horrible meeting and without the senior pastor saying it directly outright, I knew that whatever happened in this meeting was going to determine my employment at the church. It had been made that clear. At the beginning of the meeting, I was told I would not be allowed to speak. I had to listen to these six women, in turn, tear me up. Not just about the youth activity but about everything I had done since day one of my ministry that they did not like. They attacked my ministry. They attacked my

> character. And not only did he allow them to do that, he encouraged them, egging them on, saying, "Oh, well tell her, too, about how she dresses. You talked about that to me and she needs to hear that too."

In addition to the emotional impact, Marta's employment security was in the forefront of her mind and informed her response to the criticism:

> By the time it was my turn to speak, I had so much emotional shit basically put on me, I just burst into tears. And then what are you going to do, right? I was 33, single and dependent on this job for which I'm barely making ends meet. I can't get fired. You know, I'm applying for jobs, but I'm not there yet in terms of finding something. And so I had to go around to each of these women in turn and apologize. Sometimes genuinely apologize and sometimes just apologize to get through the meeting.
>
> And then one of the women, probably the nicest of the six, said, "You know, I know this meeting's been hard. So, I just want to tell you why I appreciate your ministry. And I just want to let you know that I forgive you." Then she looked at the other five women and the senior pastor to kind of be like, "Okay, now it's your turn. Like we've already torn her apart. Let's try to put some of this back together." And they all just stared at her.

The meeting left Marta feeling "ripped to shreds" with no ability to defend herself and ultimately being congratulated by the senior pastor for enduring the psychological abuse:

> And at the end of this meeting, after I'm still crying and have just been ripped to shreds for five years' worth of stuff, the senior pastor had the gall to look at me and say, "Marta would you please pray to close the meeting for us?" And I wanted to say no, but I felt like I could not say no.
>
> And so the meeting was finished. I was in my office, and the senior pastor literally stands in my doorway. Physically takes up all the space, so even if I wanted to leave, I couldn't get around him. And he's like, "You did a good job today. This could have gone very differently. If it had gone very differently, this probably would have had a very different outcome." Really implying that apparently, I had done enough to keep my job.

Marta's experience highlighted several notable themes seen in other interviews including (1) economic insecurity and the need to maintain employment amid ongoing abuse; (2) criticism extending beyond immediate incidents and including broader accusations of the clergy woman's character, personality, and physical body; (3) additional forms of punishment including being assigned a mentor and being instructed to make amends with other individuals; (4) the need for

therapy specifically for trauma recovery in order to reconstitute oneself after intense abuse; and (5) the realization that this was "not right," both during and especially after the traumatic event(s).

Social Process: Punching Bag for Others' Emotions

Marta's experience was mirrored by other women who described constant emotional abuse within their ministry contexts. Allegra described being "screamed at" on several occasions and ultimately feeling like a "punching bag for others' emotions." With strong background and training in family systems theory, Allegra did what she could to coach herself through some extremely difficult interactions:

> I remember a woman who got mad at me for asking to put a projector screen in the church. You'd have thought I was bringing the devil himself into church. She literally screamed at me. But that's not the first time I've ever been screamed at by a church member. At another call I got screamed at and cornered by a middle-aged woman who said that I wasn't doing things right. In looking back on it, I feel like maybe she's threatened by me or something, but it was a lot of screaming.
>
> Even though I know what's going on and I'm trying to have this conversation and almost coaching myself through it, it still feels awful because you're like, why are you yelling at me? I'm still a human being. Why are you taking this out on me? Why? Why have I become this projection for your feelings about this? This hurts!
>
> I would go home sometimes crying because I was holding all this emotional baggage from people taking stuff out on me, you know. And I don't think you can function very well if you're constantly being a punching bag, if you're constantly the container for other people's emotional baggage, that they haven't worked through for themselves. And there is an expectation that I would just take it.

Others described similar feelings of being overwhelmed by the constant emotional projection of parishioners and other church leaders. Kay remembered "feeling toward the end I just felt like I was drowning. It just felt like every day I was treading water as hard as I could, screaming for help. And just something else would just push me back under." Over time, Haley's experience with a highly combative female senior pastor left her "running ragged." She

initially thought that she "got out just before the point of burnout. But in retrospect, I was past that point."

Conceptual Category: Feeling Decimated (physical)

The conceptual category of *feeling decimated* overlaps considerably with the previous conceptual category, as physical and psychological abuse were extremely intertwined within the women's experiences. The following social processes were present in increasing levels of intensity, beginning with *others needing to possess or control my body,* followed by more acute experiences of *no longer functioning*, and *just one death threat.* Similar to the conceptual categories within the co-core dimension of *feminized servanthood as dehumanizing*, the women negotiated both internalized messages and prior social conditioning as well as external messages and explicit expectations within their ministry contexts.

Social Process: Others Needing to Possess or Control my Body

The women's experiences of others wanting to control or possess their bodies was evident throughout the interviews, with varying levels of scrutiny. Each of the women experienced extensive commentary on a variety of aspects of their body, including their hair, clothing, shoes, earrings, makeup, and the pitch or tone of their voice. The women experienced this form of commentary as varying levels of criticism, judgement, and voyeurism. The desire to possess or control the women's bodies was further magnified by others' comments and behaviors surrounding pregnancy and reproduction. I initially placed this social process in a later conceptual category of *conflicting gender narratives*; however, it became clear that the ongoing assumptions, treatment, and commentary around the women's bodies warranted placement within the co-core dimension of *feminized servanthood as abusive.*

Numerous comments related to physical presentation, clothing, and hair, with some women tolerating the comments as something they had expected entering the ministry, while others drew a firm line. Certain parishioners showed a disturbing fastidiousness, sometimes bordering on obsession, regarding the women's bodily presentation, which was later reinforced in the social process of *gendered infantilizing.* Marta described her experiences in this way:

> I definitely had people doing inappropriate things, touching me inappropriately. I will not say sexually at all, but I mean, in terms of touching my hair, or "let me fix your shirt" or "let me. . ." whatever it was. It was kind of like I was the grandkid. I was the kid who mommy or daddy could help touch and fix up. It bothered me, but I also sort of knew that I was not alone in that, in terms of the experience as a young clergy woman. It just kind of grated on me. I had one woman who decided that my hair was not right on Sunday mornings and always put her hands in my hair, and I had to tell her a number of times, "This is not appropriate." I finally grabbed her wrist one day when she was reaching up. And she got so mad at me. She literally did not talk to me for the rest of my time there. And I thought, you know what, this is your problem, not mine.

Miranda received a variety of comments on her style of dress. From older men, it was often sexualized with one male colleague asking, "Hey, I love the boots today, would you tell my wife where you're going shopping?" Older women would criticize her use of high heel shoes noting, "You need to be up there and people shouldn't be distracted by you. They need to come to God." Conversely, her choice of shoes while leading worship services was often celebrated by younger women, one of whom said, "I love coming forward for Communion because I want to look at your shoes." Miranda felt that her clothing choices were never meant to be offensive or to draw attention, but were a form of creative expression and spirituality. She saw her aesthetic choices as a "way into the spirit so others can see that God is more than just these rules or this black-and-white kind of vision of God." Similarly, Elsa saw that her clothing choices were seen as "permission-giving and liberating" for some and "scary and threatening" for others:

> In the winter I would wear tights, which I love to get because I wear a simple black dress every day. I'd get sort of fun patterns for my tights. And there was a man who would say "Oh, I love seeing what your tights are like." And it was like, I think you mean that well,

> but it doesn't come out well. Even my theology was liberating. And my presence was permission-giving and liberating for others and that is scary and threatening for many.

In terms of pregnancy, there was intense discussion directed at clergy women who were pregnant, nursing, trying to conceive, or not wanting to have children, which felt deeply offensive for those who experienced it. Sandra and Marta, both of whom were married and in their early forties while in ministry, received ongoing pressure from church members to get pregnant, despite each woman expressing not wanting to have children. After being told by a female church member "If you're going to get pregnant, you're going to have to go fast," Marta responded, "Yeah, okay, thanks for telling me how my body works. I'm keenly aware of that." Sandra shared that church members "pretty obviously expected me to single handedly or 'single wombedly' populate their Sunday school. They didn't know that we weren't planning to have children and they were upset, noting 'but you promised that you would.'"

Melanie described the inappropriate comments about her reproductive life as a reflection of a larger desire among some to have "possession over a clergy woman's body," which she found extremely upsetting:

> I had church members who would tell me on a regular basis, "I just think that your son needs a little brother or sister." I finally got to the point where I was like, "Well, we're trying, but it's not working. Do you want to know what's going on?" And they got more information than they wanted because somehow my ability to reproduce was part of their narrative of what should be happening in the church. I think, not even just the role of being a mother and a pastor, but there's some sense in which church people feel some sort of possession over a clergy woman's body that I swear they don't over a clergy man.

Social Process: No Longer Functioning

Each of the women described the inherent overlap between their emotional and physical well-being, which mutually informed each other in the women's ministry contexts. Psychological abuse would manifest itself in concrete physical symptoms and illness just as questions of physical safety would cause feelings of intense anxiety and emotional stress,

particularly if not adequately acknowledged by the surrounding church leadership. Several women noted the ways in which the psychological abuse they experienced manifested physically to the point that they could no longer function. More severed examples are included in the dimension *nail in the coffin,* in which the drastic physical impact of emotional stress and psychological abuse became the deciding factor in decisions to leave. Kay described "feeling decimated" yet unable to take medical leave because of the church's financial situation and lack of support from the denomination:

> After my second year it was just going downhill really, really fast. After feeling terrible all day, I had to go to the hospital immediately after an evening meeting, which turned out to be a pulmonary embolus. I was in the hospital for the next week, and the treasurer came in and, looking back, I was like, this is such an abuse move. She had just raised your voice at me in a meeting in front of witnesses at the church and then came into the hospital the next week with a gift and "We hope you feel better." I felt like I couldn't ask for medical leave, just by the tone of voice of the denominational representative, so I ended up having my dad drive me to the church because I was just so unwell. I would preach sitting down, go home and sleep for like four hours. I was just decimated.

Vivienne described "physical unravelings" that alerted her to the extreme nature of what she was experiencing. The physical effects heightened after a particularly difficult conflict with the senior pastor who, along with the church board, had refused to pay the taxes on the pastor's housing, which was part of her employment contract:

> I remember the physical unraveling starting with the migraines. But then I got huge sores and I don't even know what it was, around my eyes. It was like a dermatitis that they could never explain. It just erupted on my face. It was both itchy and painful. I would wake up and my eyes would be completely swollen shot. And it would just be day to day, and really painful, all from stress.
>
> My sleep patterns were so disturbed, completely rocked. I ended up getting into long distance running, even though I was so dead tired. At least to have that rhythmic breathing, it would help reset my brain and just to be doing physical activity was good. I was a nervous wreck to the point where I would just jump out of my skin when people would look in my office door. And it just was fatiguing to the point where my body was really unhappy. I was not functioning well.

Social Process: Just One Death Threat

Just as Marta's experience of psychological abuse encapsulated the conceptual category of *chipping away my soul,* Sarah's experience, noted below, is a powerful reflection of the social process *just one threat.* At first, Sarah's experience seemed like a possible outlier due to the highly specific and traumatic nature of two very real death threats that she endured. However, in analyzing the interview through constant comparison with others, it was clear that several elements of her disturbing experience were reflective of larger themes that carried across several other interviews, which will be discussed below. Sarah described a male congregant, Erik, who she and others in her ministry context understood as "psychotic." He had already been convicted of financial fraud and was actively abusing his wife, specifically trying to push her toward suicide. Sarah provided pastoral care to his wife while she was being hospitalized in an ICU following an attempted suicide, after which Erik began stalking Sarah and pressuring the denomination for her removal. Sarah stated that eventually:

> He was picked up by the police and he was wearing a disguise. He had a backpack full of ammunition and he had multiple weapons and a map of my house and my office at church. He was gonna kill me and his ex-wife. I remember the sheriff calling me when Erik had been picked up. I didn't know I had been stalked. I didn't know there was a hit list and I was on it. The authorities knew, but I didn't. As things unfolded, it was really scary.

I paused the interview for a few moments as Sarah was visibly distraught. It had been over ten years since the incident but the trauma of the experience was clearly still felt, even after significant therapy and her own work as a trauma-informed spiritual director. After Erik was arrested and made bail, Sarah entered an extremely frightening period which included court appearances, safeguarding the church, her home, and her physical body, as well as providing leadership for a fearful congregation while at the same time being the primary target:

> On Sunday mornings I would come to church, wait in the parking lot, make sure my police escort was there, who would come in with me and then wait until I left again, just so I could literally function. I have no idea how I functioned during that time. I really had this attitude of—I'm not gonna let him chase me away from ministry. And I just kept showing up to church, just kept doing my job, you know. I didn't really realize I had a choice but to keep leading.

As described in the co-core dimension of *feminized servanthood as dehumanizing,* Sarah felt strongly that she needed to continue serving in her role as pastor in order to prove her competence as a woman clergy and leader. She stayed several years after the initial death threat, but after she found a hole drilled in the gas tank of her car, she felt, "I can work through one death threat. Two is my limit." She described her physical and mental state following the second death threat:

> I had a month medical leave, during which I was throwing up every day. I lost about 25 pounds, because I just couldn't do it. I mean I was literally in post-traumatic stress. It wasn't just the car. I think all the stuff from before that I had just repressed and gotten through just exploded and I couldn't do it anymore. By this point I'm starting to think that I can't go back to my church. I was so angry, so hurt, but at the same time didn't want to quit. I heard a lot of "maybe you aren't cut out for this" kind of talk but I had never heard of any of colleagues going through anything remotely like what I went through.
>
> I came back to work and still felt really sick and traumatized and a colleague said, "You're just letting your anxiety get to you." And I literally resigned right there. I was like, I'm done, I can't. I felt so gaslit by the place I'd served well for so long, as if it was my fault I was "anxious," aka a severe case of PTSD. I probably should have left the first time around, but I didn't feel I was done doing ministry there. I felt I can work through one death threat. Two is my limit.

Sarah's experience reflected key themes that emerged in other women's experiences including (1) others denying or not taking seriously a pastor's suffering; (2) clergy women feeling the need to endure suffering in order to prove their competency; and (3) internalized messages and understandings of one's calling to serve at all costs, thereby overriding or minimizing feelings of intense stress and abuse. These elements of pastoral suffering, both internalized messages and external expectations, reinforce the social process of *harmful humility,*

which was discussed earlier in the conceptual category of *embodying the self-sacrificial woman.* The intense physical and psychological hardship and abuse that the women endured was complicated by the notion of "sacrificial embrace" (Greene & Robbins, 2015), outlined in Chapter II, in which some of the women interpreted the extreme conditions as inherent to the work of ministry and something they were willing to accept based on their overall sense of purpose and calling. However, over time, the women questioned their own acceptance of abuse and mistreatment, as they identified more clearly what they could and could not tolerate.

Conceptual Category: Naming the Abuse and Trauma

The words "abuse" and "trauma" were regularly used within the women's reflections; however, this language was often not accessible to the women while in their ministry settings. The ability to name some of their experiences as abusive and traumatic often emerged as part of their decisions to leave, while others did not use this language until undergoing professional therapy as part of their process of healing and recovery. The key social processes included in this conceptual category are *mirroring domestic abuse, love bombing and narcissistic abuse,* and *spiritual abuse.*

Social Process: Mirroring Domestic Abuse

Several women noted previous exposure to the dynamics of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence, either through work experience, educational background, or first-hand experience within abusive marriages or relationships. Allegra made a direct connection between her experiences in ministry and domestic abuse noting:

> I've done some work around domestic violence because that was part of the issue in my marriage. Sometimes I felt like you're just supposed to take it. You're the woman and you're supposed to take this and we should not question it. That's the part I think that hurts the most. Sometimes I just laugh, just a release of how crazy it is that I took it for so long.

Melanie described seeing a counselor two different times due to a previous intimate relationship that was emotionally abusive. Through her work in therapy she was able to identify that "this man had pushed some boundaries that I just had never firmly set in my life, so I knew that I had important work to do in that area." This awareness ultimately helped Melanie identify co-dependent patterns within her ministry setting that she was no longer willing to perpetuate or tolerate. Sandra's background in psychology and previous training at a domestic abuse response center alerted her to the abusive dynamics between herself and the congregation. She was aware of how "different types of abuse can exist in the world and how they are perpetrated. There are both physical and emotional ways that you can manipulate and control someone."

Social Process: Love Bombing and Narcissistic Abuse

Just as the experiences of domestic abuse, noted above, alerted some of the women to the psychological abuse they were exposed to within their ministry settings, Hope's divorce from what she described as a controlling and manipulative man alerted her to the manipulative behaviors of church-based narcissistic abuse. Hope specifically pointed out the phenomenon of "love bombing," a type of emotional abuse where someone uses grand gestures and ingratiating communication in order to manipulate and control another person (Strutzenberg et al., 2017):

> I don't think I ever really appreciated how the systems of patriarchy worked within the church. I mean, you know it's there, but until you get exposed to it and experience it firsthand and have to deal with it—it's very disorienting. From the standpoint of you always feel like church should be a safe space. It should be a place to go for healing. And it was very much that for me, for a long time. And then it became the thing that was doing harm to me. That part was hard to wrap my head around because it felt almost like when you fall in love with a narcissist and they love bomb you and then the switch flips.

When asked to describe the experience of "love bombing," Hope offered the following:

> So when you first go into ministry and go to seminary, you get told so often how this is a calling, this is your vocation, and they're so excited that you're here and they're so excited that you're gonna be such a great pastor and blah, blah, blah. And so you get kind of lulled into this sense that you're valued. You're valued up until you challenge. And the

> minute you start to challenge anything or you start to say, “Hey, this isn’t okay,” then it’s like I said, that switch just flips. And then you’re the problem. And you know, well, if you talk about this, we can’t place you in another call.

Allegra also observed the shift that happens when “stepping out of line,” but more so from the vantage point of a parent-child relationship, which is addressed in more detail in the social process of *gendered infantilizing*:

> Initially it feels really warm and fuzzy. Because you’re like, oh look, they just love me so much. And it feeds your ego, like I’m so cool and I’m just so special, because they’re telling me how special I am. But as you’re going along, you’re like, no, they’re infantilizing me and I’m a child to them. I’m not an adult and I’m not their pastor. I am the representation of their own children for them in their mind. And if I step out of line, then that’s when there’s going to be problems. Whatever that line is for them. And so that feels awful because there’s a lack of respect, and also not being seen as an equal or even as a leadership presence because you’re just a child.

Social Process: Spiritual Abuse

In addition to domestic abuse and narcissistic abuse, several of the women described an overarching spiritual abuse. Sandra described overlapping layers of abuse that she experienced as a clergy woman, which she placed under the larger umbrella of spiritual abuse:

> My experience in ministry had the same hallmarks of isolation and gaslighting, discrediting, and scapegoating, all of the hallmarks of every other type of abuse. It’s just that this one was couched in theological language. It just seems to me like emotional abuse that happens in the church almost inherently becomes spiritual abuse. If somebody is physically abused in the church that is also spiritual abuse because a trusted leader has taken advantage of somebody in a place where they were supposed to feel the presence of God, and instead they feel the presence of an abuser. And violence is done to them instead of spiritual growth. I would just say any type of abuse that happens in a church or a faith community setting, ends up being spiritual abuse as well as whatever other type it might be.

LaVerne described spiritual abuse as taking advantage of one’s passion to serve. She shared a devastating example of a young male colleague who she felt was “being pimped for his passion,” and placed in a very precarious and underpaid call setting that left him unable to physically care for himself:

> It's literally disgusting that the church even years after I've left is in the same space. That it drains you. It can kill you. It doesn't care that you're dead. It wasn't something you can make a living with, and needing to take on other jobs. It took a lot of your time. It took a lot of your money. It took a lot of your energy. And he never came to terms with that. His health started to deteriorate. . . and they found them dead, just laid out on the ground. And he was probably in his early forties. They pimped him for his passion. Legit took advantage of it.

Jenny initially felt hesitant to use the word "abuse" but ultimately felt that the church institution "empowers abuse":

> I feel bad because I don't think that these people are bad people, and I think that's the hard thing. I think that the institution of the church, the way that it's structured and the theology that has been passed down in recent decades, empowers abuse. It makes it so that's the only way that people know how to interact with their pastor is in abusive ways. And then it's sanctioned by the church. No institution is stellar at this. But I feel like if you go into the secular world, there are definitions for abuse. There is a sense for what appropriate language is, and appropriate behavior. But I don't feel like that exists at all in the church. Not at all. I feel guilty using the word "abuse" and at the same time I know that that's what I've experienced. I feel coming out of the church, I'm finding myself in a way that I had completely lost. I can see how I was treated terribly for a long time.

Having established the co-core dimensions of *feminized servanthood as dehumanizing* and *feminized servanthood as abusive,* the following discussion will outline the remaining primary dimensions included in the explanatory matrix (see Table 4.1 above). In grounded theory methodology and the process of dimensional analysis, after a central or core dimension is identified, additional primary dimensions are established, which relate back to the core dimension. This study presented five primary dimensions including (1) *developing a sense of call;* (2) *differentiating self from system;* (3) *exposing vs. protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems;* (4) *nail in the coffin;* and (5) *reconstituting self.*

Primary Dimension: Developing a Sense of Call

In each of the interviews, the women shared elements of their "call journey" and the feeling of being drawn into ministry. Some entered the ministry more hesitantly than others and some felt more prepared than others for the particular challenges and gendered narratives they

would face as clergy women. Several women had family members who were clergy and therefore saw some of the realities early in life, while others had significant professional experiences outside of the ministry that equipped them with high levels of professional competence as well as alerting them to unhealthy practices that they observed over time. All of the women were exposed to moderately progressive Protestant traditions, which have a well-established history of women's ordination. Each of the women also expressed a genuine sense of belief in and understanding of the value of experiencing God in community with others, as well as an interest in sharing one's spirituality and gifts of leadership. The dimension of *developing a sense of call* connected to later feelings of betrayal and unmet expectations, particularly within the primary dimension of *exposing vs. protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems.* Table 4.4 outlines the conceptual categories of *prepared and not prepared, finding myself in seminary,* and *losing myself in seminary,* along with the corresponding social processes.

Table 4.4

Primary Dimension: Developing a Sense of Call

Primary Dimension	Conceptual Categories and Corresponding Social Processes		
Developing a Sense of Call (entering the system)	**Prepared and Not Prepared** • Not naïve coming in • Reluctant entry	**Finding Myself in Seminary** • Embracing a language of justice	**Losing Myself in Seminary** • Doors closing

Conceptual Category: Prepared and Not Prepared

Social Processes: Not Naïve Coming In

Each of the women entered the ministry with different levels of awareness and expectations of what they would encounter. However, overall, the clergy women entered the ministry feeling a strong sense of identity as a pastoral leader, as well as confidence in their own emotional and intellectual intelligence. Some were influenced by parents or relatives being

clergy or because they were raised within a church context throughout their upbringing. Others came to the ministry through curiosity later in their adult lives, having had a variety of different professions outside of congregational ministry or church-related work. In observing the diversity of experiences involved in developing one's sense of call, there was a high degree of agency and choice surrounding each of each women's decision to enter ordained ministry, which later played into feelings of betrayal and un-met expectations described in later primary dimensions.

There was a balanced representation of women who had non-ministry careers or church-adjacent work prior to ordained ministry, as well as those who had participated in church culture throughout their upbringing and went directly into seminary after college. Allegra, who entered the ministry in her mid-thirties after a successful career outside of ministry, felt she wasn't a "spring chicken and knew how the world works." However, she noted that she was unprepared for how her gender, age, and petite stature would cause others to "constantly question my authority about me knowing things, like some kid who didn't know anything."

Those who had clergy family members ranged from not wanting to follow in the same path to always wanting to be a pastor. LaVerne, whose father was a pastor, noted:

> I was not the child he thought would ever go into ministry. I was not that person to myself. But here we are. And maybe in retrospect years later, maybe that was my way of getting his attention. But I pause when I say that because it's something I actually enjoyed and it's something that you know I did well in my little space of the world.

Christy, who also came from a family of clergy, expressed that she had always felt called:

> I feel like I've been called to be a church leader since I was very little. I have always seen that ministry is possible in many ways because of how truly everyone in my family is a clergy member and so I feel very clear about my own call. But I think other people's voices, like my female supervising pastor, get in the way of having God connect with people and creating community.

Both of Haley's parents were pastors within a particularly progressive denomination that valued social justice and inclusivity, but the stress of pastoral leadership had a significant physical and

psychological impact, particularly on her father. Her father's early death while he was still in ministry alerted Haley to the damaging toll ministry can take on clergy. She noted, "I was just really run ragged. And my father died of heart attack in his mid-forties in ministry. So yeah, I just wasn't willing for that to run myself into the ground."

Social Process: Reluctant Entry

In addition to those women who entered the ministry with a keen awareness of the challenges and pitfalls of congregational culture, there were those who hesitated to enter parish ministry with initial preferences toward church-adjacent work. Whether teaching religion at the doctoral level or supporting faith-based non-profit organizations, there was an initial desire to remain outside of congregational life. Deborah felt reluctant at first, noting:

> I studied religion in college and I liked it so much that I wanted to keep studying it. I applied to seminary sort of understanding it as a master's program and then got halfway through my first year and was like, oh, they're training us to be pastors. So, it was a reluctant entry. But then when I got into it, I loved it. No day is the same, you get to be involved in people's intimate lives, and learn things about them, but also do research and preaching.

Kay, who had done youth and camp ministry and never intended to be a pastor, had prior understanding of the challenges that clergy women face:

> I knew the research was that clergy women leave ministry within five years. So, I had expected some of this. Entering the ministry, I wasn't anybody's dummy. But I wasn't even thinking about seminary and wasn't really set on the idea, but I wanted more theological training and practical ministry skills. Seminary was a really healing experience for me. I had a lot of affirmation. A professor talked me into being in a specific cohort for Advanced Congregational Development, saying they'd be transferable skills and it was just affirming. I remember leaving seminary thinking, "Wow, this is most confident I've ever felt!" But I kept saying, I don't see myself in church ministry. I don't see myself in the local church.

Conceptual Category: Finding Myself in Seminary

Social Process: Embracing a Language of Justice

There were distinct gleanings from each of the participant's experiences in seminary, which is typically a three-year graduate degree program followed by ordination within a specific denomination and ministry context. Of the positive seminary experiences that were noted, Rose described important "learning opportunities" when faced with different forms of oppression within her denomination. Having entered the ministry in her late thirties, Rose noted that her experience at a Black seminary was extremely liberating:

> In seminary I was able to question the patriarchal interpretations of scripture that was indoctrinated in me. I learned liberation. I learned about womanism. I had Black professors. We saw ourselves in the text. I dismantled a lot of that antiquated thinking and began to embrace a language of justice, particularly as I identify as a Black woman in ministry and pastoral leadership.

Elsa, who entered the ministry in her mid-twenties, had an extremely positive experience in a paid residency immediately after seminary:

> It was billed as sort of the Cadillac on-ramp to a minister and starting out on the best possible footing I could. I had a mentor and a great congregation. I was paid well and had all the resources that I could need to start up and industry. It was a two-year contract and I thought, wow this is the wagon that has hitched me to a star. It was a really good, healthy experience yet at the same time, from the outset of that call, I was really aware of myself as a woman and how that was different.

Conceptual Category: Losing Myself in Seminary

Social Process: Doors Closing

While seminary education was a generally positive and edifying experience for each of the clergy women, there were a few participants who attended seminary institutions that promoted highly conservative theologies and world views that ultimately set the stage for dehumanizing experiences in ministry, a reality that Jenny referred to as "constantly closing doors":

> When I would go to people who were supposed to be trusted mentors, whether it was another pastor or professors in seminary, I would meet a blank wall or a closed door and it was up to me to figure out how to support myself because nobody would stand in the gap for me. Once I became a pastor, I talked to a seminary professor about how it was as a clergy woman and how discouraged I felt with all this negative stuff around women being ordained. She told me, "Well women are the weaker sex because they're penetrated during intercourse." So, it was just time after time after time, I would open up and be vulnerable with somebody in the power position and receive responses like that. It just threw me back on myself and I had nobody to really rely on.

Joan had similar seminary experiences, which she described as a "dark night of the soul":

> In seminary I had pretty much the same experience as all of the congregations that I was a part of leading. I had one of those "dark nights of the soul" where I was in crisis about it. When I came out of that, I found myself transitioning to more progressive ministry, thinking that a more affirming, inclusive space would be a safer place for me and somewhere where accusations of groping or sexual assault would be taken more seriously. But it was never a safe place.

Primary Dimension: Differentiating Self from System

Amid highly gendered expectations and psychologically abusive ministry contexts, illustrated in the co-core dimensions of feminized servanthood, there were important areas and opportunities where each clergy woman was able to enact agency and self-actualization based on her own understanding of pastoral leadership. These areas of agency are reflected in the primary dimension of *differentiating self from system*, in which the women actively negotiated the conditions and consequences reflected in the larger co-core dimensions of feminized servanthood. This back-and-forth interplay is reflected by the juxtaposition of conditions, consequences, and opportunities, in which expectations of gendered servanthood converged and sometimes collided with the participants' various expressions of self-differentiation (see Figure 4.3 above). Table 4.5 illustrates the primary dimension of *differentiating self from system,* which includes the conceptual categories of *decentralizing leadership, conflicting gender narratives* and *negotiating expectations and boundaries.*

Table 4.5

Primary Dimension: Differentiating Self from System

Primary Dimension	Conceptual Categories and Corresponding Social Processes		
Differentiating Self from System	**Decentralizing Leadership** • Equipping others and sharing power • Meeting people where they are • Bringing people to the table	**Conflicting Gender Narratives** • Gendered infantilizing • Mother-daughter wound • Disrupting masculinity	**Negotiating Expectations and Boundaries** • Porous boundaries • Buffering bullshit • Unspoken and double-bind expectations

As noted in Chapter II, self-differentiation is a relational practice in which one is able to identify with another person's emotional state, yet at the same time maintain an awareness that "the source of the affect is in the other" (Jordan, 1991, p. 69). This practice is essential in pastoral leadership as one balances empathy with appropriate boundaries. The women described self-differentiation in various ways, including Marta and Cindy describing it as a process of determining whether something or someone was "not my circus," and choosing to disengage. Sarah described her process of becoming self-differentiated as "being able to leave the room and I am still intact":

> I feel like in early ministry I felt like a waitress. Like, tell me everything that you want and I will fill your order. And now I just think not everybody is going to be happy and that's okay. So, I think my approach to leadership now is also very much grounded in being whole, of being able to come in and minister to somebody but not take on their stuff. It's being able to leave the room and I am still intact. I haven't given away pieces of myself. It takes a lot of self-awareness of what am I bringing in that's my stuff and owning my own stuff too.

These understandings of differentiating self from system enabled the women to apply important interpersonal skills when engaging with others in the ministry settings. Alongside these opportunities for agency, the women also faced resistance and consequences from those who were more enmeshed within toxic church systems and relational dynamics.

Conceptual Category: Decentralizing Leadership

The conceptual category of *decentralizing leadership* was a particularly strong area of discernment, decision-making, and agency where the women were able to intentionally engage with other clergy, church leaders, and lay persons as well as the surrounding community outside of the church walls. While there were significant opportunities within this category, the women also faced significant consequences as their leadership approaches were often in contrast to others' unhealthy behaviors and relational practices. These consequences are outlined more fully in the conceptual category of *exposing vs. protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems*. In a social context fraught with highly gendered expectations and ongoing psychological abuse, it was extremely heartening to hear the women describe their own leadership approaches and strengths. As noted in Chapter III, initial sharing around leadership strengths in early interviews compelled me to apply theoretical sensitivity to the subsequent interviews, in which I asked each participant to describe or elaborate further on her own understanding of her approach to leadership. The specific pathways of agency and intentional leadership approaches are illustrated by the social processes of *equipping others and sharing power, bringing people to the table* and *meeting people where they are*.

Social Process: Equipping Others and Sharing Power

The women noted several ways in which they would equip others and share power within their ministry contexts, using such language as "inclusivity," "collaboration," "shared vision," and "power with." Several women noted that their collaborative approaches with other clergy, staff, and church members, was often received with question, uncertainty, or rejection among those who were more accustomed or preferential toward unilateral or top-down approaches of leadership and authority. Hope, an associate pastor, noted the congregation's discussion as to

whether she wanted to apply for the senior pastor's position after his retirement. Having no interest in the position, Hope noted:

> "If it's a pastor that I can work with and we have a shared vision," I said, "I'm all for it." Which apparently was completely bizarre to them. They were like, oh, having a senior and associate that would share a vision of what should happen at the church? Huh. And I was like, "Yeah, how else does it work?"

Melanie described a similar desire to work collaboratively and took great care to work with the church board to clarify job descriptions, noting, "From the get go, I said you cannot give someone a terrible evaluation and try to get them to quit just because you don't like one thing about them." Haley described her collaborative style as "prioritizing different things" than the older White male leadership of the congregation who she felt "talked down to her":

> I work a little differently than they expected their pastor to work. I prioritize different things. I prioritize children. I don't prioritize my own ego in an unhealthy way. And my tendency to ask questions before making assertions. My tendency to not present things as if I have the answer. My collaborative style was, I think, always perceived as weakness or insecurity or timidity.

Deborah described her collaborative approach to leadership as "a lot of conversation and assuming wisdom is in the gathered body. I'm not the expert in the room." This was in contrast to the male senior pastor who she felt had been "formed to be the leader, the one in charge who made all the decisions, and that was not how the system worked in the congregation." Similarly, Allegra described her leadership approach of equipping others as "empowering communal voice," a practice that she deeply valued but also enacted out of necessity due to others' inability to hear and respect her:

> Some folks were hard, so how I would work with that is I would use the communal group to speak for something instead of using my own voice. I would check in with the conversation and then I would try to guide the conversation a little bit. But when that person would just be that person, what I found in those situations is that when it came from their peers it was a lot harder for them to argue against it. But if it came from me and my voice, it was so easy for them to tear it down.

Other participants noted such approaches as "complementing others' visions" (Vivienne), not wanting to be a "woman alone on an island" (Kay), "showing a united front" (Haley), "thinking of possibilities not just problems" (Allegra), "trying hard not to be a rigid person," (Christy) and "visioning as seeing the big picture and the little details in order to move forward" (Sandra).

Social Process: Bringing People to the Table

The women expressed various ways of building relationships and partnering with others, both within the congregation as well as in the surrounding community. Christy described her inclusive leadership style as "bringing people to the table," particularly with regard to affirming the LGBTQ+ community:

> I think that who I am as a leader is someone who wants more people at the table. I think because of that I had a really large spectrum of people I was a pastor to, because that's my job. There's a lot of really conservative culty churches in this area and that was another reason why I wanted to go there because it's such a witness to be the progressive church in kind of a desert land. I actually want to sit down at the table with people and talk to them. If something that I said was confusing, I want to look at why it was confusing. And then I want to change my mind, that's what reformed theology is, to be in relationship with people so much so that we might change our minds too.

Other women shared examples of building relationships and partnering with others beyond their immediate congregation. Miranda described the process of being a "catalyst for connection," particularly with other regional churches and clergy. Having felt that nobody was reaching out to her, it was important for Miranda's own psychological well-being to ask others "'How are you doing? What's going on in your church? What do you do? How can we pray for each other?' But people just get really busy and they get in their silos." Jenny was also very committed to building relationships with the larger community, but faced resistance within her congregation in the form of "passive engagement":

> I wanted to offer activities that would fill needs in the community and connect them to the church and to really think outside the box about what church looks like. But the

> church was just really passively engaged. So that the whole thing had to be conceived of and implemented by me. So, it was just exhausting.

An important part of bringing people to the table and partnering with others also extended to creative ways of using the church building, which was often received with caution, suspicion, and/or rejection from within the congregation. Kay, a solo pastor, opened the doors of the church for the community to use during a significant flood, which led to conflict with the church's facility manager. Christy explored offering building space for a local AA group and opening the church's playground to the larger community, noting "What does our table look like? Is our table letting our building be used? I think it should be." She noted that after she left, the playground project "was dead."

Social Process: Meeting People Where They Are

The women noted having highly observant forms of communication, in which they utilized incredibly nuanced aspects of their own emotional intelligence, in order to assess where people were within a particular conversation or conflict. Haley described how she applied this intentional approach to conflict resolution:

> I built it over time. I had a challenging family life growing up. I had an older brother who had anger management issues. And I was the peacemaker. So that was part of it, I think. I also worked with developmentally disabled adults in my early career before ministry. And then also worked with children and not to equate the two, not to infantilize people with disabilities, but having to meet someone where they are and figure out what's going on with them and how to find some common understanding and get everybody's needs met. I've built that skill set over time and have also taken workshops on mediation and nonviolent communication.

Deborah, an associate pastor, noted:

> I think one my skills is attentiveness to the emotional sense in a room. Understanding what's happening in the collective emotion. Being able to tell that the vibe is changing. Like, we should pause and pay attention to what is happening. Something's going on, somebody over there in the corner is upset.

Marta described the process of meeting people where they are as offering "teaching moments that also show empathy":

> I think sometimes being a woman gives you a greater sense of empathy, not always. The parish associate that I love dearly is a man and has one of the greatest senses of empathy. But that empathy has carried me forward and it helps me, particularly in teaching and training deacons [who do pastoral care visits]. I love finding teaching moments that also show empathy, and those end up combining in terms of strengths.

Allegra found that an important part of her leadership was understanding family system dynamics, which for some of the clergy women was part of their seminary training and/or denominational training around interpersonal boundaries:

> My training in family systems actually became a strength for me because I was able to look at what was happening in different churches and different systems and say, okay, who is the identified patient here? Who are they willing to listen to? What is the history behind this? Has this conversation happened before? Who are they identifying me as?

While working with a highly combative and reactive older female senior pastor, Haley described her intentional approach to conflict resolution. This description relates strongly to the earlier conceptual category of *absorbing others' emotions.* However, in addition to being understood within the dimension of *feminized servanthood,* Haley felt that taking on the "emotional labor" within a relational dynamic served as both a leadership strength and at times a method of survival:

> My thought process was always like, this person is really activated and is saying things that are extremely reactive. Engaging with them as they are is not going to lead to a resolution that is satisfactory for either of us. And I need to defuse this and then sort of shepherd us along. Do the emotional labor of processing this interaction that we've had, this conflict, what's at stake for each of us, what kind of outcome would be agreeable so that we can preserve this working relationship. And she just was not willing to do that. I explained this to the denominational leadership at one point noting that I have really good conflict skills and she was just not having any of it and was just actively antagonizing me. I wasn't taking the bait and that made her even more mad.

Melanie offered an additional nuance, noting that her approach to intentional communication and conflict resolution was not about making everyone happy:

> I had a male church member who was very caring and supportive of me who said, "I just want to help you make everyone happy so you can stay here as long as possible." And I started pretty early saying to him, "That's not why I'm here. I'm not here to make everyone happy."

Marta understood the idea of meeting people half way, which she did not experience from other leaders in her ministry context. She felt it was important to "apologize for my role in something because to me that's what you do. That's the mature thing to do when you've made an error, you apologize and work it out."

Conceptual Category: Conflicting Gender Narratives

Narratives and expectations of the self-sacrificial woman were felt throughout the women's experiences, with some causing more damaging effects and consequences than others. The narratives reflected in the co-core dimensions of *feminized servanthood* represented the most dehumanizing and abusive elements, often involving both internalized messages that the women had absorbed as well as external gender expectations that were imposed upon them. The women's experiences revealed another level of *conflicting gender narratives* that involved more conscious and deliberate agency on the part of each woman as she navigated gender expectations that did not align with her own self-understanding and approaches to leadership. These experiences of non-alignment became core elements of self-differentiation and the process of distinguishing self from the larger church system. Each of the women experienced varying degrees of resistance to her own practices of self-differentiation, which once again highlights the overlap between conditions, consequences, and opportunities. Within this conceptual category are the social processes of *gendered infantilizing, mother-daughter wound,* and *disrupting masculinity.*

Social Process: Gendered Infantilizing

The process of *gendered infantilizing* came from multiple directions, including both men and women who were congregants, senior pastors, other church staff, and denominational leaders. This behavior was observed in men who were both similar age or older than the clergy woman, and from older women who were consistently in the age range of 60–75. These relational dyads will be discussed further in the social processes of the *mother-daughter wound* and *disrupting masculinity.* During the interviews, the women clergy often shared not feeling young themselves, as many entered the ministry in their mid-thirties with prior professional experience. However, as noted in Chapter I's overview of the social context of American Protestantism, Gen-X/Millennial clergy women are entering the ministry and securing high-level pastoral positions at a much younger age than previous generations (Hope, 2018).

LaVerne, a solo pastor and judicatory leader within a predominantly Black denomination, noted that a female denominational leader's decision to make her co-dean as opposed to dean was driven by both sexism and ageism:

> Because I had more education than most pastors in the denomination, the [denominational leader] gave me opportunity to serve in positions that some people take 20 or 30 years to get to. I use the word "co" because the politics of it was because at twenty-five, I was young. The man who was co-dean with me had no experience in pastoring. I think he just finished his seminary degree, but he was in his forties at the time. And he was a guy. I mean, that's all it boiled down to. He was a pastor, and he was a guy. And I did all the work because it was easier.

Allegra's experience of being verbally attacked by an older male clergy at a denominational meeting was described above in the core dimension of *feminized servanthood.* She reflected further on this incident, observing certain elements of gendered infantilization:

> We can disagree, but you don't have to do it aggressively or like an assault almost, you know, like it did feel like I was being "put in my place" if I'm really being honest. Like you need to be "put" somewhere, you're getting out of your place young lady. Get back in your place.

Haley noted that infantilization operated across her intersectional identities, particularly with her decision to not fully disclose her nonbinary identity as a self-protective measure within her ministry context:

> Part of my not being totally out professionally is knowing that there's a great social sigma, particularly for AFAB [assigned female at birth] people who have a nonbinary identity. There's a lot of infantilization, with that. Particularly of teenage girls who are AFAB people. But I think even with just a young woman of any age, it gets infantilized. And I just did not want to give people any more reason to not take me seriously. As bad as that sounds that's how I see it. Or any more reason to think that I'm high maintenance. Or people just not wanting to work with me because my work right now depends on people wanting to work with me, wanting to pay me to lead a retreat. So, it's a self-protective thing that does relate to being not taken seriously as a young woman to begin with.

Allegra described the process of "seeing through" and observing underlying social dynamics, which was initially celebrated by others as a leadership strength but later considered problematic by some due to their perception of her as a child:

> I'm really good at observing people and behaviors and kind of figuring out at least a beginning of what's happening. But I want them to tell their own story. Initially people are really drawn to that in a church setting. But as it's going along they're like 'Oh gosh, she's too powerful, we need to shut that down. She sees right through me and that feels uncomfortable. On the surface I wanted her to be my pastor but really she's like my kid, so I can't have her looking through me and seeing me.'

The process of gendered infantilizing often manifested in assumptions that a clergy woman "had no knowledge" or "didn't know what she was talking about." Haley remembers feeling her thoughts and ideas being discounted until someone else in the room made the same point:

> There were so many meetings where I was saying something and people weren't processing it somehow and then it would be said by someone else and then it was a good idea. It made me feel insane and made me feel like it was a gaslighting experience. I later read a study of CEO boardrooms where when women talk, there's a huge percentage of the time the first thing that is said after that is some guy either restating what they just said or undermining it in some way even if they agree. And that felt so resonant.

Melanie described similar experiences of her leadership “not being taken seriously”:

> When I began my second appointment, an older man in the church was taking my husband and me around town introducing us to some people, including the editor of the local newspaper who said “Well, they told me she was pregnant. I didn’t know she looked like she was 12 years old.” And I felt the same thing within the congregation, the people who never really let me be their pastor in the first place. They may have come to church, but they didn’t see me as their spiritual leader. I remember feeling, “How do I even preach to these people?” I definitely had a sense of, I’m gonna try to end well for the people who do still support me and who do still take my leadership seriously and look to me as a spiritual leader.

Undermining a clergy woman’s knowledge and experience was experienced by both LaVerne and Marta who had a significant amount of education in comparison to their male colleagues, including Doctor of Ministry degrees, which is the highest level of ministry education. Marta felt being treated like a child stemmed from her intellect being “intimidating” and “threatening” to both of the senior pastors she worked with, yet something “I’m not going to deny. I’m smart and I’m intelligent. And my congregations have known it.”

Social Process: Mother-Daughter Wound

The term “mother-daughter wound” was identified fairly early in the interview process, with other women sharing related experiences of intergenerational conflict between themselves and older women parishioners and clergy. Described briefly in Chapter I and II, the mother-daughter wound relates to generational asymmetry, internalized sexism, and conflicting gender identity narratives between different generations of women (Hasseldine, 2017). Throughout the interviews, intergenerational conflict was consistently present between Gen-X/Millennial clergy women and women ages 60–75. Conflict was felt in a variety of different relational dyads, including the clergy women’s interactions with female senior pastors and denominational leaders, staff members, particularly administrative assistants and music directors, as well as women congregants. Those who were critical of a clergy woman’s

leadership included both those who held professions outside of the home and identified as feminist and/or politically progressive, as well as women who reflected more traditional gender roles in their raising of children and working primarily in the home or domestic spaces.

Joanna, a senior pastor and head of staff, described an antagonistic relationship with an older female staff member, which Joanna attributed to elements of emotional neglect and familial conflict within the woman's childhood:

> I experienced various levels of disrespect and undermining my ministry, as well as pretty high levels of expectation, especially from one staff member. I didn't know about the concept of the "mother wound" until very recently, maybe in the last couple of years, and I'm pretty sure that's some of the dynamics there. She has sisters, her father died when she was very young. And I just suspect she spent a lot of her time pitting her sisters against each other to see who she should get on her side. Her love language was gossip and slander and it was a constant resisting and tearing people down. And if you weren't on her team for that, then you were against her.

Allegra brought to the surface a highly nuanced understanding of her identity as a daughter within her ministry context, which reflects the earlier social process of *gendered infantilization.* Allegra described others' perceptions of her as a daughter informing their rejection of her ability to exercise pastoral authority:

> Every home has rules, right? Every home has cultures that they live into so their children have to live into them and particularly daughters have a role in those homes. For context, cause part of systems theory is understanding your own family, I'm the oldest of three sisters, so I have always been the helper. And I've always been the peacemaker. In my own family, I functioned as a third parent in my household to my younger siblings. So, people in the church identify that pretty quickly. They could sniff it. So, here's an oldest daughter coming in, you know, it's different than the guys, right? She can help us but she can also fit into these roles that we have in our own families and our own system. What becomes a complication is that when I have to exert authority as a daughter, it becomes a cognitive dissonance, because children "aren't supposed to speak out against their parents." At least in some contexts, right? Many contexts. When I would exert authority, that's when things would get mean and nasty.

While Allegra experienced being seen as a daughter who "stepped out of line" when she exhibited agency and authority, Cindy described an older female congregant explicitly stating

that she expected Cindy to be “her mother,” which reveals a complicated role reversal within this dynamic:

> She stormed into my office on a Sunday morning after church and screamed at me about how she expected me to be her mother and what the church expected of me was to be maternal. She was so angry at me for not fulfilling that role, for not being what she saw as motherly. Which, by the way, has never been an aspiration of mine. I am not a mother. I’ve never wanted to be anyone’s mother, especially not my 75-year-old congregant’s mother. And I did not feel like I had any particular way to respond to her and the amount of anger that she was giving me and to protect myself from that. My personal form of protection in normal life would be to tell someone that they’re not allowed to speak to me that way. But being shut off from what felt like a normal response to me was I think really psychologically damaging in hindsight.

Miranda experienced significant animosity from an older female staff member who was frustrated because she couldn’t become a priest. Miranda noted, “My existence was threatening to her and that’s what I get from a lot of the older women. Either they had their own dreams that were squashed or they’re just kind of old school.” Allegra described similar criticism and judgement from the church’s treasurer, a highly educated and self-identified feminist who “would walk down the hall and check in on me to make sure I was doing things properly and correctly, to make sure I was staying in line.”

Conflicting gender-identity narratives between the clergy women and certain Baby Boomer women was a constant reality, particularly around childrearing and the role of children in the life of the church. The clergy women who were mothers of young children during their pastorates felt distinct judgement surrounding their personal choices and boundaries from older women congregants who may not have been afforded the same agency and freedom of opportunity during their personal and professional lives. Melanie, a solo pastor, felt resentment from older women in the congregation with regard to her taking maternity leave, which has only recently become a standard policy within most mainline Protestant denominations:

> When I had my first child, I had people who were surprised that I didn't take him to church, saying, "We didn't know you were gonna hide him away." I'm like, "Well, he's a newborn baby." And then there were other women who said, "Well, I didn't get eight weeks of maternity leave when I had a child," and I'm like, "Well, sorry, but I did."

Melanie also felt a disconnect between some women congregants' overinterest in her newborn child and later comments about her children's participation in worship that made her feel her children "were never really welcome at the church, like they were just a complication for me."

Joanna described a strong generational difference between the reaction of a Millennial female staff member and a retired Baby Boomer clergy woman regarding Joanna's concerns over sexual harassment from a male church member:

> I ended up giving a speech in a staff meeting and said, "There's nothing to be done about this, but basically so and so is handsy so watch out," sort of like 1950's secretaries sitting around together talking. And that was where the reactions got very interesting. A woman who was a Millennial staff member said, "Why didn't you say something?" Which at that point I don't think I really solidified that it was a freeze response. I just know I didn't say anything. I also had a Baby Boomer parish associate who said, "He just touched you there? That's all?" Like, what are you worried about, that's happened a million times. And it probably did. She was one of the first women to go through seminary in the denomination. She was well into her seventies at that point and I'm sure she had a significant amount of that kind of harassment and she just didn't really understand why I had been so concerned about it.

Melanie identified two overlapping factors influencing the "push back" she received from older women including certain women needing to hold onto their authority and at the same time feeling threatened by different ways of seeing the world:

> I feel like I almost always got the most push back from women, usually women in their probably late fifties or sixties. Some of them had a certain level of authority within the church as committee chairs or had some sort of lay leadership. And I don't know if they felt threatened by having a clergy person who was also a female or if maybe we just really disagreed on the way we saw the world.

Social Process: Disrupting Masculinity

Alongside the conflicting gender narratives between different generations of women, a related social process of *disrupting masculinity* was evident with certain men who appeared to

present a particular narrative of masculinity. This study did not capture the interiority or self-understanding of the men, however, the women clergy perceived that the men were threatened or somehow destabilized by various levels of agency, autonomy, and authority exhibited by the clergy women. While the intergenerational conflict between women related to certain Baby Boomer women, the men who reacted negatively to the women in this study included both those close in age to the women or slightly older as well as men in the Baby Boomer generation.

Joanna noted anxiety among certain men within her congregation that her very presence would disrupt their experience of manhood. This became evident during her final interview with elected church leaders:

> The first interview question I received was, "With the feminization of the church, do you intend to dismantle the men's group?" I had no idea what that question meant but I came to understand. When I came in as the senior pastor of that particular church, I was overseeing an all-female pastoral staff. I didn't intend to dismantle the men's group, though it was made clear that I was never welcome.

Sandra observed that the resistance to her leadership by men wasn't necessarily from older men, but from those closer to her age who seemed to feel that she threatened their masculine narrative of superiority:

> In my first two pastoral positions, I ended up working with six different older male senior pastors. The older retired ones were the most affirming and the younger ones were the most judgey and least open, least willing to communicate, and least supportive of anything that I did.

Allegra felt resistance from the male music director who was roughly her age, as well as the older male senior pastor who dismissed her request for intervention as the head of staff:

> The staff member constantly felt threatened by me and would try to undermine me. He's about my age. And I remember bringing that to the head-of-staff pastor at the time and he was like, "Well, what do you want me to do about it?" I said, "I don't know, be his boss and say knock it off. That's what I would do." But he persisted with, "What do you want me to do about it?"

Joan, who had raised concerns about a mold infestation in the church building, described a disturbing interaction with a male congregant who attempted to protect his public image as a well-known businessman by verbally attacking her:

> At one of my last meetings where I came forward about what was happening and asked for help, he yelled at me. Nobody ever said to me, "We're gonna sue you." But that sort of relational dynamic, I think is what caused all the anxiety for me. He had a very reactive personality. And I spent much more time trying to care for his wife and his daughter then I spent with him personally. His daughter had an eating disorder, and there was a lot happening there that his wife was starting to get professional help because she herself was really struggling. I think that was a threat to his public persona and so he really wanted it kept quiet.

The women navigated these social dynamics not intentionally seeking to undermine male leadership or threaten certain narratives of masculinity. Oftentimes, it was their very presence in a position of leadership that was most threatening, particularly when the clergy women promoted increased transparency, accountability, and direct communication to promote conflict resolution, as noted in the earlier conceptual category of *decentralizing leadership.* The process of *disrupting masculinity* was both real and concrete as well as perceived and interpreted, both of which created intense reactivity on the part of certain male individuals in the ministry context. More extreme elements of toxic masculinity are described in the following primary dimension related to *exposing vs. protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems.*

Conceptual Category: Negotiating Expectations and Boundaries

Social Process: Porous Boundaries

Each of the women described the overall conditions of their ministry contexts as having extremely blurred boundaries, both between staff members and clergy as well as between clergy and parishioners. The women deployed various strategies for maintaining and protecting their interpersonal boundaries, which is a core element of self-differentiation, described earlier in this

primary dimension. Deborah, who went from a large multi-staff church to a smaller congregation, described the familial nature of porous boundaries:

> I moved to a much smaller congregation in a neighboring state, which had a totally different dynamic. They had had a female pastor before. It's a much more progressive area and the dynamic of a small congregation meant that there were more porous boundaries between me as the pastor and them as congregants. So, a lot of boundary crossing happened I think because they saw me as their daughter or granddaughter or friend, instead of professional whom they pay to do a certain job.

Sandra described porous boundaries within her ministry context, which involved both adoration toward the senior pastor despite his misconduct, as well as complicit church board members who were protected by the larger congregation. Within this context of intense loyalty, Sandra felt that:

> Accountability was never an option because he was so charismatic and so many people liked him and just for that reason they didn't care if he did anything, they just wanted his personality. Holding him accountable was never an option because the church board members were his friends and didn't want to be his supervisors. Even though they actually were his supervisors, they weren't willing to be.

Social Process: Buffering Bullshit

There was an ongoing feedback loop in which the women would experience boundary violations causing the woman to need to protect or maintain their boundaries, followed by parishioners' emotional projection and reactivity to those established boundaries. It was often described by the women as an extremely messy process of negotiation, with both internal questioning over what battles one should or could fight, and external negotiation with those who were actively crossing certain boundaries. Cindy described her role in this dynamic as "buffering bullshit," while Melanie described boundary-setting as:

> Being able to recognize that I have limitations and needs. That I don't need to bleed into what everyone else, who everyone else is, and what everyone else needs. And kind of vice versa. So, I don't know if that's really a good definition though. I had the funeral director who was like, "Well, you know, you're on call 24/7," and I was like, "No, actually I'm not. You are, if people die. I am not, because I'm not going to be able to help anyone at 2 o'clock in the morning." I'm also not on call because I am a person who has my own life and needs my own space.

Jenny often felt the need to coach parishioners on the concept of emotional projection, particularly in their treatment of other church members. Unfortunately, these efforts at conflict-resolution were often not well-received:

> There was someone who got mad because you know, clearly there were more things, right? But she couldn't talk about it in a way that was decipherable. She got mad because the organist's husband died and she heard about it in the grocery store. I said, "You can't get mad at the organist for not telling you first. She's in her grief and this isn't about you." Three days later this person just rage quit the church board.

Social Process: Unspoken and Double-Bind Expectations

There were multiple layers of spoken and unspoken expectations that the women experienced, which related to both job performance and pastoral responsibilities as well as the perpetuation of specific gender roles and behaviors. The women struggled to navigate this system of overt and implicit social rules, overlapping and often contradictory messages, and rigid ways of being that were not reflective of their self-understanding and approach to leadership. Hope described the inability to navigate this constant tension noting:

> In my case, it was a bunch of double bind expectations and things that started off as, "Why are you out in the community? You should be in the office more. Oh, you're in the office. Why aren't you out there more?" It was all those double-bind expectations where you can never win.

Cindy described the constant need to "nimbly shift between roles" and the impossibility of satisfying everyone's unspoken needs:

> There were often really high expectations of this kind of multi-level relationship with the pastor, which wasn't unique to me. As I talked to people, what they wanted from all of their pastors was for them to be constantly able to shift between being their best friend, not just a friend, but like their best, their closest friend, and their therapist and a spiritual leader. And being able to nimbly shift between all of those roles all the time, but to be the idealized spiritual leader who was never going to tell them that they could be better. So, I found a lot of that and it was kind of at the crux of when I was getting to the worst part of my time there.

The women consistently shared the unspoken expectation of needing to be a mind-reader, particularly around health needs and hospitalizations of older congregants. Melanie described a woman who was extremely angry that she didn't visit her husband in the hospital after surgery:

> But she hadn't told anybody until after the surgery had even happened. I can't read minds but it was definitely like "Melanie is not taking care of the old sick people enough and that's all we want her to do."

This expectation also extended to Sandra, who described the "expectation that I work more hours than I was working. It didn't matter how many hours I was working, but there was always the expectation that I wasn't working enough."

Primary Dimension: Exposing vs. Protecting Toxic Leaders and Harmful Systems

The primary dimension of *exposing vs. protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems* included significant sharing around the clergy women's own efforts to promote transparency and accountability within their ministry contexts. I initially placed the desire for shared-accountability under the dimension of *differentiating self from system.* However, it soon became clear that there was a combined process of (1) the clergy women exposing problematic elements by promoting transparency, accountability, and equitability within their ministry contexts, which was then met with (2) individuals, congregations, and larger denominational structures protecting problematic elements in the form of deliberate silencing, overt dismissiveness, and gaslighting. This led to the development of the primary dimension of *exposing vs. protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems,* in order to highlight both the opportunities that the clergy women found to advocate for themselves and others, as well as the resistance and consequences they faced from the surrounding church culture. These dynamics were reflected in the social processes of *dealing with toxic leaders, your voice has no reality* and *no one taking a stand* (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6

Primary Dimension: Exposing vs. Protecting Toxic Leaders and Harmful Systems

Primary Dimension	Conceptual Categories and Corresponding Social Processes		
Exposing vs. Protecting Toxic Leaders and Harmful Systems	**Dealing With Toxic Leaders** • Toxic masculinity and throwing weight around • Internalized sexism • Others controlling/ manipulating the narrative	**Your Voice Has No Reality** • Gaslighting • Vortex of insanity • Thrown under the bus	**No One Taking a Stand** • Fed to the wolves • Dismissing sexual misconduct • Moral disalignment

Conceptual Category: Dealing with Toxic Leaders

Within the social process of *dealing with toxic leaders,* the women utilized a variety of leadership strengths, emotional intelligence, and coping mechanisms in order to negotiate extremely difficult working relationships, as illustrated by the dimension *differentiating self from system*. As the relational dynamics became untenable, and in many cases abusive, the women shared what it felt like to expose the unhealthy dynamics within their ministry contexts. The women often faced concrete efforts on the part of others to protect particular leaders and overall systems of church culture and governance. The women experienced toxic leaders, both men and women, at every level of the church system, including local congregations, church boards and staff, and denominational leaders and structures.

Toxic leaders represented a variety of identities including gender, race, age, and sexual orientation. The primary typologies that emerged were (1) insecure men of various ages wanting to reinforce certain narratives of masculinity; and (2) older women with internalized sexism who imposed rigid gender expectations on younger clergy women. Both of these elements were introduced above in the social processes of the *mother-daughter wound* and *disrupting masculinity*. It is important to note that these typologies are based on the lived experiences and understandings of the research participants and do not take into account the internal thought

processes of others. The scope of this research and its inability to capture others' interiority will be discussed further in Chapter V. A third typology emerged wherein congregations were unwilling to hold toxic leaders accountable in part because of the leader's marginalized identity. This was the case with an older White lesbian pastor within a very pro-LGBTQ denomination and a Black male pastor in a predominantly White denomination engaged in racial justice work. In both of these ministry contexts, the women noted that while the surrounding church system acknowledged each of the leaders' toxic behaviors, they seemed to be unwilling to hold them accountable because of a marginalized identity.

Social Process: Toxic Masculinity and Throwing Weight Around

A common form of harmful leadership that the women encountered was toxic masculinity, which Sandra defined as:

> Masculinity is just the fact of being male and identifying as male and how do you embody that. I would say that toxic masculinity is using your maleness to exert power and control over people and situations where the system has historically been in your favor. And you are exploiting that to gain more power and to oppress other people in some way.

Marta observed similar behaviors of toxic masculinity from a psychologically abusive senior pastor, which was discussed in the dimension of *feminized servanthood as an abusive reality.* Here she described toxic masculinity as emerging more strongly when her male senior pastor was confronted with or felt threatened by women with a strong sense of self and who are not easily manipulated:

> What has been the problem with my heads of staff is both of them I think are threatened by strong women. I have a very strong personality. I'm ready to call BS when I can do it. At my last congregation, a woman who took the position that I vacated was a colleague of mine. I feel like she doesn't have as strong of a personality and she's someone who can be easily manipulated and walked all over and she'll just take it. She has been at that call as long as I've been at my current one. She is still there under him. Another clergy friend of mine who came on staff overlapped with me for a few months. She also had a

> very strong personality. She didn't last two years and had all the same complaints that I did.

Vivienne described toxic masculinity as a form of insecurity in which the senior pastor would humiliate her to make himself feel more powerful:

> The previous male senior pastor I worked with really modeled how to lead with integrity, so it was disorienting for me to be sitting around a table where I would say something and people would roll their eyes at me or shut down what I was saying or asking. There were times when the senior pastor really treated me like I was dumb. Which was so bizarre. I mean, I think to be honest, I don't think he was that smart. I don't think he had the capacity to keep up with us theologically or just in general. And I think he didn't like that and didn't like to be challenged, so he surrounded himself with other men who would just pat him on the back, whatever he said. And then to sit around a table where there was just nonsense happening and then to be treated as if I was dumb and not bright enough to figure out what was going on.

Several women noted toxic masculinity being expressed in unhealthy and even traumatic ways that silenced any form of dialogue or discussion. Sandra continually observed a male senior pastor "throwing his weight around in unhealthy ways and not being willing to dialogue." Marta noted similar behaviors of physical intimidation, isolation, and punishment, noting:

> The senior pastor's office became a place of trauma because of the meeting that happened in there. And really all the staff whenever he said, "Can I see you in my office?" were traumatized because whenever we were called into his office, we were yelled at or we were punished.

Social Process: Internalized Sexism

In addition to the abuses of power exhibited by male senior pastors, there were numerous instances of toxic leadership from older women, including other clergy, church members, and staff. Unlike the experiences of toxic masculinity, which included both similar ages to the women clergy as well as older men, toxic leadership among women came in the form of internalized sexism from women predominantly in the age range of 60–75. Haley, described an older female senior pastor as needing a "pressure release gate" and was invested in Haley's "wrongness":

> I did set boundaries when she would blow up. And it was clear to me that we're not going anywhere right then. I would say, "Okay, I see this is going on and I don't think that we can resolve this effectively right now. Let's come back to it in our weekly scheduled meeting time." And then when that would happen, she would just get activated again. And when I tried to sort of give her the benefit of the doubt, validate her perception of the interaction and say, "I understand why that would be frustrating" and gently share what I was experiencing and recognize that there was a difference there and propose ways of doing it. But she wasn't willing to see my side of it, the way that I was willing to see hers. She wasn't willing to admit any wrongdoing. She only wanted to sort of berate me. I felt like I was this pressure release gate for her. She needed someone to bait and for someone to be wrong. She was so invested in my wrongness and her need for rightness to be affirmed. Her need for my difference of some kind. I don't know, but she could not, we couldn't, compromise.

Christy, who worked as an associate pastor under co-pastors who were married, noted feeling like she was the "triangulator" between the toxic and passive-aggressive leadership of both pastors:

> They had been at the church for 22 years. And it became really evident to me the longer I served in ministry there that they had really bad communication with the congregation. The woman had severe conflicts with multiple people in the congregation and those had been brought to the other pastor, which is her spouse. But he did not address them and so when I came in as a third pastor, I just got this flood of responses from congregation members saying "We won't serve on this committee with her" or "This is the way she pushed me out of ministry" or "This is why I don't go on Sunday mornings anymore." And so, I kind of became the triangulator, because I think for literally decades people had been trying to tell the [male] pastor we have conflict with the [female] pastor but because of the nature of their relationship that was not listened to.

Social Process: Others Controlling and Manipulating the Narrative

While unhealthy leadership behaviors were exhibited differently through toxic masculinity of certain men and the internalized sexism of older women leaders, both men and women utilized the common tactic of *controlling and manipulating the narrative.* This was often evidenced during formal annual staff reviews, in which other clergy or church leaders would directly reject the accounts of events presented by the clergy woman. In addition, there was misrepresentation of broader communal narratives related to church administration and

congregational approaches to social justice. Vivienne described the process of others' "twisting my words" in ways that did not reflect her perspective:

> The senior pastor would take something you said or rightly asked for, like a day off or to be more with your family, which was my big thing, and they would start to twist those words into a narrative that was really unfair. And it was really odd to watch it happen because someone would come on staff and there'd be such a fanfare. And they would be like, this person is going to remake X and it would go along swimmingly until it didn't. And then that switch. You couldn't figure out what happened. We were all sitting around the same table. And we could never understand what happened. And the senior pastor would just say, "Oh well, they're not coming to this meeting. Oh, well, they're not doing this. They won't be present at that." And it was just this complete change of narrative.

LaVerne described manipulation occurring in the form of financial misconduct and "wheeling and dealing" at both the congregational and denominational levels, which she could no longer tolerate:

> It often happened when we were counting money, which is a very intriguing thing. When the people who typically count money—usually men—weren't around, and they'd have to call a woman to do it and they would absolutely hate to have to do that, particularly me, because I know how to count numbers and I would not let them lie or write the wrong numbers or take out money or anything like that. I've been to many denominational meetings where you'd see ambulances go to the back room because they're back there, you know, wheeling and dealing and have had heart attacks because they're just so engaged in whatever lies they're doing and they have to have a gurney come back. It's crazy. Exposure to both sides of what is and how you can approach it differently, helped shape my approach and my tolerance level.

Christy described a staff review meeting in which she was presented with a lengthy document that accused her of "coercion, manipulation, and threats." She was specifically accused of reorganizing the church library "without any authority," which Christy used as an opportunity to share how she had experienced the incident much differently:

> The library director asked if I could help go through a bunch of books donated by a lesbian couple on theology and sexuality, to make sure there wasn't anything homophobic. So, I went and spent four hours with her and another volunteer and I got to know them and dusted and stuff. I had a great time. It was one of the first space things that I helped to improve because I think space and church is really important. It's a way of being theologically open. And we made a pile of books to donate and we asked the male pastor, we said, "Here's the pile, will you please review them before we get rid of

> them?" So, none of it was done on my own volition. None of it was self-initiated by me. It was a great relational experience and all of it was done in community. It was meant to make our library more affirming and it was done in consultation with the male pastor. So, as I said that he was like, "Yeah, I guess you did ask me to do that."

Joan described the senior pastor of her congregation manipulating the narrative regarding the congregation's affirmation of the LGBTQ+ community:

> He had created a narrative that the people who went to his church were outsiders and wouldn't fit in anywhere else and nobody else would take them and they were the only true safe church for people who had affirming theologies. Which again is not true because we also were one of the only affirming churches who didn't have a queer person on staff. But everybody really bought into this narrative that if their church died, they had nowhere to go.

Allegra noted, "On the surface they would say to folks out in the pews that weren't involved behind the scenes like, "Oh yeah, Allegra's doing great. She's so wonderful." But behind the scenes was an about face." Rose felt similar noting:

> I was at a very historic church and embraced by a very large community outside the walls of the church. And everything seems so great, but behind the scenes I witnessed some very disheartening processes and behaviors that just were not in alignment with what I believed God was calling me to.

Conceptual Category: Your Voice Has No Reality

Social Process: Gaslighting

Controlling the narrative was also evident in the form of gaslighting, in which the clergy women were made to feel that their experiences, perspective, or description of certain dynamics, concerns, or incidents were not valid or real. Deborah was told by a denominational leader that "Your voice has no reality," after she raised concern that social media content she had shared had been used in a denominational presentation as a way to illustrate why congregations were leaving the denomination. Deborah felt she was constantly under surveillance, noting that:

> A single tweet about a feeling produced this firestorm of resistance and hatred. I was being surveilled and the point of their work was to get me to shut up, like they didn't

> want my voice. A denominational leader told me once that my voice had no reality. Literally, word for word, "Your voice has no reality in this conversation."

Marta noted that having two retired clergy in the congregation, a woman and a man, validated her observations of being gaslit and manipulated, which helped her to stay grounded:

> I love these people dearly. They are so grounded. They are so healthy and hold confidence so well. I am able to go to them and say, "Here's what the senior pastor said. Here's what I think of the situation that's going on. Am I being gaslit? Am I being manipulated? Or is there something to what they're saying?" And about 99% of the time, they say, "No, he's wrong. Yeah, you've got a good head on your shoulders." And I think having that person to ground me and to be able to say, "This is right. This is wrong. Your inclination that you're being manipulated is correct. Keep doing what you're doing." That has probably saved me and kept me at my current call longer than I would have.

Sandra described gaslighting happening around her resignation, in which church leaders pressured her to not disclose what actually happened:

> I announced to the congregation that the board had asked for my resignation and that I decided to give it and that my last day would be a month from then. And it was a complete and total shock to the whole congregation because again, the board didn't have the authority to do that, but they had done it and the denomination was backing them up. That evening I no longer had access to my church email account and I was told that I was being put on paid leave for the last month and I wasn't allowed back in the building. Because I should not have made that announcement to the congregation because that was a bad faith thing. That was inappropriate for me to tell them that the board had asked for my resignation and they literally said, "The board didn't ask for your resignation." I had the letter in my hand where the board asked for my resignation. I mean the gaslighting was so overwhelming.

Social Process: Vortex of Insanity

Hope entered her ministry context as an associate pastor, having been given no information about the current senior pastor's sexual misconduct with the previous female associate pastor. She shared that the gaslighting and silencing around the misconduct felt like "a vortex of insanity," noting:

> There's the "Did you really experience that? Is that really what happened?" Gaslighting is when people make you question your own experiences and your own reality. People start just kind of going "Did that really happen? Is that really the way it went?" Or they

> just flat out lie and say it was something else that went down. It just felt like I was right back in this weird vortex of insanity again and just being like, what is this and how is this ever allowed to continue on?

Joanna, a solo pastor and head-of-staff, described her struggle to cope with a verbally abusive staff member, who pushed Joanna to the brink of sanity:

> Over the course of five and a half years I tried to respond to her behavior pastorally and with some empathy. But there were a couple times where I got sliced pretty significantly verbally from her. She would go on long rants and she would talk without taking a break and she would throw accusations in all along the way. It was just insane. Eventually, to cope with it I just set a timer. And that way I could pay attention to the timer.

Social Process: Thrown Under the Bus

Several women identified instances when they or other women staff members attempted to be transparent about congregational dynamics, which led to denial and defensive behaviors on the part of other church leadership. The feeling of being "thrown under the bus" spoke to the highly protective measures of toxic leaders who sought to maintain their positions of authority. Joan described a senior pastor who asked her to intervene in a certain congregational conflict, only to deny any conflict when it was brought to others' attention:

> I would get into a group meeting and I would say, "Hey, it's come to my attention that there seems to be some things going on here. Can we talk about that?" And everybody would get upset and my boss would go, "Joan what are you talking about?" and like throw me under the bus. Or I would approach him privately about something that I thought was concerning with child safety or with uses of finances. And then in meetings, he would bring up things to try to undermine me and say, "I know that Joan is concerned about this but obviously we would never think that about this person." Things that should have been handled in confidence that were instead used to turn the community against me.

Marta described a female staff member "being thrown under the bus" by the male senior pastor because she exposed ways in which he had lied about her to other staff:

> I know that a current staff member. . . he was telling things about her to staff members behind her back. Staff members told her, and she confronted him about it and he lied to her about having done it. She caught him in that lie and she's now leaving the church. It

> was lies on top of lies. He will throw his staff under a bus before making himself look bad. You know, we're all expendable, but he's like the Almighty God in the church.

Conceptual Category: No One Taking a Stand

The conceptual category of *no one taking a stand* represents the women's observations of an overall lack of accountability, including church boards not holding other clergy accountable for mistreatment of other staff, regional boards not holding congregations accountable for misrepresenting their ability to hire a full-time pastor, and denominational governance not holding clergy accountable for mismanagement of funds and sexual misconduct. These unstable elements combined to create a reality in which the clergy women were placed in precarious calls that compromised their overall physical and psychological safety, financial security, and emotional well-being. These dynamics were reflected in the social processes of *fed to the wolves, dismissing sexual misconduct,* and *moral disalignment.*

Social Process: Fed to the Wolves

Hope described the experience of being placed in a highly precarious call in which she was not informed of the senior pastor's recent history of sexual misconduct. After raising concerns to multiple individuals within the denominational system, her voice was continually silenced or minimized:

> It was so disheartening to feel like they had fed me to the wolves. And then just, you know, when I came screaming, "There are wolves," they were like, "Are you sure? Are you sure there are wolves? We don't think there are wolves." I think that's the part that really gets to me. I mean, there's so many parts that get to me, but it's just the fact that they knew this about him. And they still sent me in there. And sent me in saying, "Well, if you see anything" and when I said, "Okay, I'm seeing something," to still have let it go down the way it did.

Allegra, who was verbally attacked by a well-known male clergy known for his social justice work in the denomination, felt that those who were loyal to him made excuses for his behavior:

> Fortunately, I had enough fortitude afterwards to go and talk to some other people about it and they did follow up with it. But it didn't feel very satisfying because they were like, "Well, you know, he's been sick." Then why was he at the meeting if he's sick? I've been sick and I don't treat people like shit.

Several women noted that they were hired by congregations that were dishonest or not forthcoming about their ability to offer a fair salary as outlined in their contracts. Kay described that the lack of transparency around the church's finances prior to her arrival caused her to be blamed for not having "figured out the finances of the church":

> There was one woman in particular that in hindsight had way too much power, but she was already in those positions when I came in. She was the chair of the administrative council and chair of the finance committee and so had a lot of power and she was the one who just kept landing on me hard for not figuring out the finances of this church. To this day, I do not know if the push for a full-time clergy person after years and years of having somebody part-time came from the church or came from the denomination. My saving grace was that I had already seen the writing on the wall. I had done the math.

Deborah, who expressed her commitments to LGBTQ+ inclusivity on social media, requested protection for herself during a denominational meeting based on a previous death threat within the denomination:

> Right before the denominational meeting I asked my supervisors, "These people are very angry with me and they have a documented history of violence. What protections are available for me?" I don't actually think I'm in physical danger, but I don't want to be in an enclosed space. People know who I am, where I am, and have been very angry at me. Death threats were put under the hotel room door of a lesbian leader in the church at our annual conference. So, it's not an unfounded concern to ask for protection. But there was none. Absolutely nothing was done about it that.

While there was no concrete response to her request for protection, Deborah acknowledged that her ability to ask for protection was more than what was afforded her denominational colleagues who are clergy Women of Color:

> I was terrified. But there's the other side of that coin in that I'm a pretty privileged White woman and so I have a sense of being protected. My Women of Color friends in the denomination have told me that is very different than how they feel.

Social Process: Dismissing Sexual Misconduct

In one of the most disturbing moments of sharing, LaVerne described both men and women minimizing and silencing the ongoing sexual misconduct between male denominational leaders and young women seeking ordination:

> There was a culture of sexual misconduct. Even after a denomination leader who was a woman addressed the behaviors, it didn't necessarily stop with her, it just went underground. There were power dynamic issues, not as much with me, but I had to step in for a lot of my younger female colleagues. One or two got pregnant by male pastors that were on the ordination board. One had an abortion; one had the baby. But you know, that was just kind of the culture in that particular area. It pissed me off particularly when it was towards women seeking ordination. I remember being in a meeting where a male pastor was required to sit down for six months, and I was sitting next to another woman who was a clergy and she said, "I don't know why he has to do that. If God forgives him, surely we can." And I just looked at her like she had lost her mind. How are you making sexual misconduct towards someone okay? We tried to encourage the women to speak up if something happened, particularly the students. But it was a power thing you know, if this person of power that's on the ordination board can make or break you being ordained. You know, if someone tells me to do something, I'm going to do it. I don't have a choice. It was frustrating that they didn't feel they had a voice.

Sandra's denomination arranged for a counselor to meet with her and her male senior pastor, who had a known cocaine addiction and ongoing sexual relationships with other staff and church members. The counselor, who was a colleague of the senior pastor, dismissed and minimized the reports of sexual misconduct:

> When I came to the counselor and I said "I feel like Gary is keeping inappropriate boundaries with a church staff member," the counselor just said, "People have different understandings of boundaries." That's not the right answer. I mean, as a counselor he should have said, "What do you mean by that?" and asked me for more information to clarify. Instead, he just dismissed my concern out of hand and it turns out that yes, Gary was indeed violating every boundary in the book.

Hope, who described her experience earlier as being "fed to the wolves," found that the senior pastor's misconduct was enabled on multiple occasions, including with youth and other staff members:

> I don't know that I was trying to at the time challenge the system as a whole. I was trying to do what I thought I was supposed to be doing. I thought it was my responsibility to report this stuff. And to say hey maybe this needs to be looked at and investigated further because I've got a youth director here who's telling me that he's making really inappropriate sexual comments about minors. And that to me was like, you don't mess around with that. That's not something you just brush off and laugh about. There were so many red flags.

Social Process: Moral Disalignment

The women described feeling that they were in a kind "altered universe," in which the surrounding social system operated along a different set of ethics, social norms, and rules of engagement. This feeling of *moral disalignment* created the feeling of existing in two worlds, which became further intensified when the women promoted transparency and mutual-accountability surrounding issues of financial or sexual misconduct, and exposed instances of toxic leadership. Rose, a Black clergy woman, described the "double consciousness" or "twoness" that she faced working within in a predominantly Black denomination, where she struggled to navigate the space of Black communal identity within a larger White or Western narrative:

> Similar to what W. E. B Du Bois calls this "twoness," where we're Black and from the African diaspora being introduced forcefully into a nation that was predominantly White. We have to show up in both systems in order to seek liberation for ourselves. We couldn't do so just one sided. We have to learn the other side as well and I felt like I've done that for the ten years that I was involved in pastoral leadership, where I would work with people that were choosing this capitalistic Western way of thinking and having power over people. That's where ego comes in. You're so stuck in your ego and stuck in this Western way of thinking that you have totally forgotten about the African traditional religions and midnight hush harbors when we were enslaved.

The double consciousness described by Rose pointed to her particular racialized experience as a Black clergy woman working in an historically Black denomination. This experience was not mirrored by the White clergy women, due to their position of racial privilege and affiliation with White denominations. However, the White clergy women did experience a form of

moral-misalignment, or cognitive dissonance, in which they felt compelled to go along with a dehumanizing and dysfunctional system out of a need for financial and employment security, or simply because they didn't realize how bad the dynamics were. Vivienne noted:

> There were a lot of things happening around that table, some of which I was not privy to because I was not in the boys' club. Some of which I sensed was happening and couldn't parse out. And maybe some of which I even felt was silent toward at some point and I didn't realize how nefarious it was until it was too late.

Primary Dimension: Nail in the Coffin

While the earlier dimensions involved ongoing interplay between conditions, consequences, and opportunities, the primary dimension of *nail in the coffin* centered around significant consequences that the women experienced, in which their agency was highly compromised and diminished. All of the women had experiences of knowing or realizing when they had had enough, which many described as the "nail in the coffin" or the "final straw." This feeling often solidified after growing awareness that the clergy women were being abused, targeted, or sabotaged in some way within their ministry contexts. After experiencing these dynamics over a period of time, some of the women felt they had more agency and ability to advocate for themselves, while others felt increasingly silenced and isolated in their ministry contexts. Whether one felt pushed out, forced to leave, or was able to leave on one's own terms, each of the women recalled important decisions they made around their work, personal lives, and physical bodies. These dynamics are outlined through the following social processes of *becoming the target, life was threatened,* and *deciding to leave.*

Table 4.7

Primary Dimension: Nail in the Coffin

Primary Dimension	Conceptual Categories and Corresponding Social Processes		
Nail in the Coffin	**Becoming the Target** • Lightening rod • Scapegoating • Ousting the threat	**Life was Threatened** • Not seen as human • Body taking me out • Staying will kill you	**Deciding to Leave** • Vulnerability in betrayal • Throwing my hands up • Saving my life

Conceptual Category: Becoming the Target

The conceptual category of *becoming the target* was an extremely large coding family, with almost all the women speaking to this dynamic with incredibly powerful language and imagery. The depth and enormity of the specific experiences within this category were eventually divided into the three chronologically sequential social processes of *lightening rod, scapegoating,* and *ousting the threat.* Figures 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7 illustrate the diversity of in-vivo language used by the women to describe each of these social processes.

Social Process: Lightning Rod

The social process of the *lightning rod* speaks to the building momentum of negative energy and criticism around the clergy woman. Derived from family systems theory, the "lightning rod effect" points to the phenomenon whereby relatively self-differentiated individuals within a social system become a focal point for system anxiety and ultimately absorb or become the target for others' unresolved conflict (Jalovec et al., 2011). For the clergy women in this study, this process often developed over time and would intensify or escalate during times of leadership transition, conflicts around important decisions within the church and/or surrounding community, polarization around national politics and issues of social justice, as well as expressions of self-differentiation on the part of the clergy woman.

Figure 4.5

In-Vivo Coding Language Related to Lightning Rod

Allegra, who had significant training in family systems theory as part of her seminary education described the lightning rod effect in the following way:

> When somebody differentiates away from the system, in response, the system fights back by making that person or situation the identified patient. They become the problem. And in doing that it's like lightning. Lightning hits where there's metal, or there's something to attract it. So, the system is electrically charged up with this feeling that they've done something one way all the time. And then by just physically being there as a human being and the first female pastor, I became a lightning rod for all this electrical energy about feelings about politics. I was an easy target to get all their feelings out about that, I guess all the things they'd been storing up.

Kay described a similar phenomenon of an "anxiety spiral," which she experienced from a group of mothers in the congregation where she served as the director of youth and families:

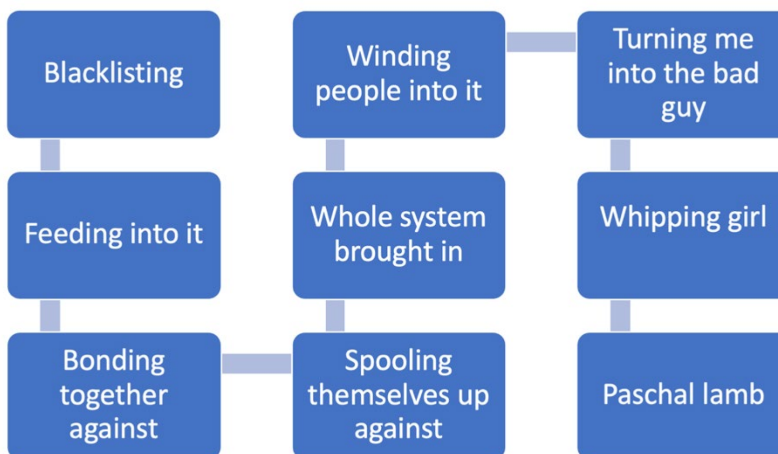
> I generally had a pretty positive experience until this time when three moms of kids in my program got themselves into an anxiety spiral and looking back, I think it was tied to power. They were three of the parents who had really advocated for that position to be established, but they also had the most leadership in that area prior to me being hired. When I came in, I think they felt a loss of power and control over the program. The head pastor was also new, so I also think it was a little bit of a lightning rod sort of phenomenon, maybe within that pastoral change. It was like they couldn't be mad at the lead pastor, so they'd be mad at me. So, I left there on not great terms.

Social Process: Scapegoating

The social processes of the lightning rod and scapegoating are intricately related, with the initial stage of the lightening rod representing the growing anxiety within the system being directed at the clergy women, often without conscious awareness on the part of the clergy woman's opponents. The scapegoating process then appeared to pick up, in which individuals would "bond together" or "group together against" the clergy women through often un-grounded accusations that were then spread throughout the community. This then led to individuals being "swept up," "spooled around," or "wrapped up into it," in ways that left the clergy women unable to defend or protect themselves within the system. Specific in-vivo language related to the scapegoating dynamic is presented in Figure 4.6.

Figure 4.6

In-Vivo Coding Language Related to Scapegoating



Sandra described the process of scapegoating while working with a charismatic male co-pastor who had a history of drug addiction and sexual misconduct within the congregation:

> He needed a scapegoat for his bad behavior and that became me. But that wouldn't have worked if he hadn't been manipulating and pulling the wool over the council's eyes about his behavior. The concept of scapegoating is that the responsible person doesn't have to have any consequences to their actions and that all of it gets passed off on to another

> person. And that was what happened when Gary finally resigned from his call, all of the reasons for it somehow became my fault. I was the only one left and he had told them all it was my fault. Without him being present for them to talk further with him about it they just took his message word for word, and put all the blame and burden of his misconduct on to me.
>
> In the moment it was very disorienting. All of a sudden, these people who I thought that I knew and who I thought trusted me, were accusing me of things that I had never done. They were shifting blame and accusing me of being the responsible person for Gary's drug use, which at the time I didn't even know about.

Joanna oversaw a church board and several staff members who eventually "bonded together against" her following her efforts to clarify job descriptions and structures of accountability:

> They constantly were kind of spooling themselves up against this. So, I just kept putting in more and more boundaries around the staff, because the church itself had amazing ministry. The staff bonded together against me, went to the personnel committee, wrote a letter indicating that I wasn't collaborative, or they didn't feel supported in their work, and comments that I was "clearly unhappy." They told the personnel committee they really needed to deal with this so that they could do their jobs.

Hope described how confusing it was to feel scapegoated as she felt both herself and the congregation created "cover stories" that did not reflect the reality of her experience:

> The problem with telling cover stories when you're being scapegoated, is that you get so good at telling cover stories you forget the real reason you're leaving, to the point that you default to the cover story without even thinking about it until after the fact.

A spiritual director who worked with Elsa used the term "whipping girl," a term that Elsa resisted at the time, but ultimately agreed with, as it reflected the kind of aggressive targeting that she experienced:

> I worked with a spiritual director for years who worked with lots of other female clergy and she said "Every woman pastor I know [from this denomination] is treated like a 'whipping girl.' She is being harmed intentionally by her congregation and by the larger [denominational] system." And I struggle with that and yet I believe it. Young clergy women are seen as a whipping girl for the congregation. Everyone's anxiety about church growth, about decline, about a legacy, about, even the inherent punishment or shame dynamics within their faith narrative, is taken out on women. Men are elevated and exalted. Women are the paschal lambs.

Social Process: Ousting the Threat

Following the lightning rod effect and the scapegoating phenomenon, a third social process of *ousting the threat* involved removing the clergy woman from her leadership position, either by making the woman's experience so physically and/or psychologically intolerable that she ultimately resigned, or an employment contract was not renewed. A common experience was that the ousting process often escalated when the clergy was on leave either for maternity leave, medical leave, or study leave, in which she was not present to advocate for herself. A common trend was also the practice of behind-the-scenes letter writing campaigns typically by women, and occasionally by men, which served to build dissent and suspicion against the clergy woman within the larger church community or denomination. The final efforts to "get rid" of the clergy woman are illustrated by powerful in-vivo language noted in Figure 4.7.

Figure 4.7

In-Vivo Coding Language Related to Ousting the Threat

Joan became a target in her ministry setting after she was hospitalized due to a known environmental hazard in the church building. She later voiced the need to address the issue in order to promote safety for others in the building:

> I think to me it felt like I was trying to express a hurt and a concern for the health of the community, and it was immediately received as a legal threat. I felt like I was trying to have a conversation with a group of people I was supposed to be doing life with. And instead, all they could hear was, "What if she sues us? We can't have this. This can't be. This can't be a thing." But I never brought that up. I never even said the word "illegal." Although I should have. But, yeah, it felt like I immediately became the threat to their community and their community's existence. And something that was making their community bad. And they had to oust me in order to keep going.

As indicated previously, several women experienced conversations escalating when they were on maternity leave, medical leave, or study leave, preventing them from engaging, defending, or explaining themselves within in the conversations. Kay described the process of being pushed out of her ministry context after being hospitalized for a stress-induced illness:

> Things spiraled, I got sick and was hospitalized. One of church members visited me in the hospital and said, "It would be so sad if our church was known as a church that chewed up and spit out a clergy woman, a young clergy woman. We don't want to be known that way." The last week I was at the church, three people on the board were saying things to me that I thought, "This isn't you." People who had been allies suddenly turned on me. And then within two weeks the head of the board said, "We're gonna ask you to leave," which you can't do in my denomination, but a day later, a denominational representative called me and said, "They're really done with you."

Jenny felt that after a period of time, the congregation no longer had "confidence in me as a leader," and no longer supported her ministry work:

> I think it could be some sort of desire to have control. Like just trying to keep me in the pulpit, just stay there, right? Some people loved my preaching, and those were the people who were very supportive. But in the end, I'm not even sure people really loved my worship leadership or my preaching. They were just sick of me.

Marta, whose experience of trauma after being verbally attacked by a male senior pastor and a group of women is noted above in the co-core dimension of *feminized servanthood as abusive,* learned that she had been reported to a denominational leader:

> There was a mandatory meeting that I had to attend with these angry, pissed off women in the senior pastor's office at 10:00 a.m. on Wednesday. And this is when I learned that apparently whatever I did was so heinous that he had to call the denominational representative on me to say he "didn't know what to do with me."

Hope, who had delt with significant gaslighting and minimizing of the senior pastor's sexual misconduct, felt ousted in the form of being placed in an adjacent church instead of directly dealing with her concerns over physical safety:

> A large part of why I left was I got sidelined and exiled to our second site because the senior pastor refused to deal with the danger being posed by an unstable church member and refused to take seriously my concerns not just for my safety, but the safety of the congregation. A board member texted me saying, "You need to watch your back, she's gunning for you," because the church member was ranting on social media about how awful I was. Finally, the board president said he didn't think there was an "overt threat" being made, but what did I want done? I said I wanted a no-trespass order.

Joanna, a solo pastor and head of staff who underwent trauma therapy after leaving her ministry context, described being ousted as a form of "strategic sabotage":

> After I left, these kinds of flashbacks happened. And what I realized was there really was a pattern of the female music director trying to sabotage me emotionally. I really think she was trying to have me have some sort of public breakdown. It was less about her own anxiety but a strategic sabotage to attempt that. So, I wrote down all those conversations during trauma therapy, one by one. I just kind of worked through the emotion so that I could store those as memories instead of present-moment kinds of things.

A few women described letter-writing campaigns that were initiated by a small group of disaffected congregants, and later sent to denominational leaders in an effort to remove the clergy woman. Cindy, a solo pastor, described what it felt like to learn of a letter writing campaign against her that began even before she started the job:

> Starting to dig through this, I realized that a member of the church had started writing letters to the denominational offices, some six years prior, personally attacking me before I was installed. So, I discovered that had started years ago, basically when I walked in the door. He decided he didn't like my style and had been personally attacking me for years. He had said all sorts of things to all kinds of people in the church who claimed to support me, and none of them had ever told him he needed to stop. None of them had ever spoken to me about it. None of them had ever intervened in any way with that and I had no idea until that point that he and I had issues. The further I dug into things the more layers of just years of people sabotaging me behind my back. While I was thinking we were having really fruitful ministry and doing really exciting things together, there is a whole segment of the congregation who is just running everything down.

Conceptual Category: Life was Threatened

The conceptual category *life was threatened* engages earlier elements of the co-core dimensions of *feminized servanthood* as being both physically and psychologically abusive. However, in this later stage of the clergy women's experiences, the level of abuse manifested through life-threatening consequences including suicidal ideation, physical incapacitation, hospitalization, death threats, and the stress-induced deaths of ministry colleagues. Such extreme threats to life ultimately caused some of the women to question prior feelings of "sacrificial embrace" (Greene & Robbins, 2015), which previously had caused them to override or tolerate abusive conditions due to their strong sense of purpose or calling. The social processes of *not seen as human, body taking me out,* and *staying will kill you* are described below and refer to the extreme levels of dehumanization that ultimately caused the women to leave.

Social Process: Not Seen as Human

For many of the women, there was a feeling that one was not allowed to be human. This was exhibited in earlier dimensions where the women felt they were not able to express a range of human emotions, or live in a human body that has limitations. Melanie's experience being pregnant and having two children while working as a solo pastor alerted her to the extreme denial of her humanity. She asked herself the question, "Can I be a person that is a person with a body that does normal body things? Not all of those need to matter to you church person."

Several women noted physical and mental health conditions that necessitated them taking medical leave, which was well within denominational policy. The women often had to navigate multiple phases of negotiation in order to justify their request, with some ultimately being denied leave when it was desperately needed. During an extremely stressful ministry context following a

natural disaster, Cora became suicidal and was denied requests for medical leave, which ultimately informed her decision to leave active ministry:

> I was doing disaster relief coordination. My denomination was sending work teams and supplies from all over the state. And I was facilitating that and it was killing me. One of the reasons they gave for denying medical leave was that because I had not been hospitalized or had not attempted suicide, they didn't think it was serious enough. But in the paperwork, if I had done that, I would have been ineligible to receive the support. So, it was really the most insane thing. This institution has no capacity to care about people, because it wouldn't have even taken that much support to be okay. It was the worst experience of my life. Even after they granted the medical leave, after I got the financial support, the kinds of conversations I would have to have. I mean, it was so obvious that they just gave me the money because I was persistent. They never believed that I deserved it. If I had had cancer, see what it rallies around me. You would have been granted it, but because it was mental health, they didn't believe me.

Jenny described the heartbreaking experience of having had a stillbirth and feeling pressured to return after having only two weeks of bereavement:

> I was pregnant and the baby died halfway through the pregnancy. So, I gave birth to the baby and then we had the baby cremated. We went to our home state to have the ashes buried and along the way, the pastor would call me occasionally and would ask when I'm coming back. I just said, "I can't come back. Like I can't." I was completely traumatized from this, utterly traumatized. And I couldn't think about anything else except simply surviving, right? And what happened was once two weeks elapsed from when I was in the hospital to give birth, they then sent me a check and had terminated my position at the church.

Sarah described the inability of others to see her as a "human who hurts," both during the intensity of two death threats she endured and afterward during her recovery:

> They thought of me only as a helper and not one of the primary victims. As a pastor you're not seen as a human who hurts. And when I resigned, I still ran into people and they're like, "I still remember your last sermon about the Japanese art form of when there's a broken piece of pottery, they fill it in with gold." And they thought that was so beautiful. But part of me wanted to be like, "Yeah, but I've had to fill the cracks in with gold from my own resources—financially, physically, spiritually. You all were part of my breaking and not part of my healing." Instead, I felt like they thought it was my fault that I fell apart.

Cindy felt that while overt sexism and sexual harassment tapered off as she entered her forties, she continued to feel dehumanized, stating, "I'm not sure that meant that people

actually had more respect for me and they certainly did not feel any kind of obligation to watch out for me or to treat me in any kind of humane way."

Social Process: Body Taking Me Out

There were instances in which the women's chronic exposure to physiological stress and abuse left their bodies physically debilitated, to the point that they could no longer function and in some cases needed immediate medical attention. Sarah shared that the deterioration of her mental and physical health caused her to reframe her sense of spiritual calling and ultimately decide that "God doesn't call us to be eaten alive":

> It literally took my body taking me out. The toll it took on my mind and my body and my spirit was just so drastic. It's really something that I'm even a functional human being after all of that. And after the deterioration mentally that I went through after the car situation I was like, God doesn't want this for me. I really got to the point where I realized, this is not a call. God doesn't call us into things where we are literally eaten alive by toxic people or life-threatening situations. That's not what God calls us into with ministry.

Cindy described laying "flat on the floor so that I could stop spasming" as a turning point in no longer being willing to hear from others that she wasn't "working hard enough":

> Shortly after we had reopened after the pandemic, I had a herniated disc and I had surgery. I was still working, but I was working from my couch, because I could not get from my couch to my bathroom without laying down flat on the floor so that I would stop spasming. So, there was no way for me to come into church. We were still hybrid, everything was happening online and in-person at that point. So, I was doing everything just online and I found out that people were having an issue with that and thought, "Oh, she's not working." I am literally breaking my back for you people. And that was another shift of I am not willing to put up with people never thinking that I'm working hard enough. It just wasn't worth it to me anymore.

Social Process: Staying Will Kill You

For some of the women, they were not able to fully recognize the damaging realities of their ministry contexts until they were no longer able to physically function. For others, witnessing colleagues and clergy family members die due to the unsustainable conditions of

pastoral leadership, heightened their awareness that death was a very real possibility. Several women described the life and death reality of staying versus leaving, including LaVerne who noted:

> It's very sad. It's literally disgusting that the church even years after I've left is in the same space. That it drains you. It can kill you. It doesn't care that you're dead. They've done nothing different.

Miranda echoed this feeling with currently active clergy women in mind:

> Do not sacrifice yourself on the altar of the church. It will not be there. No, and it will not be there at your deathbed. It's a great perspective builder. It's like, who do you want to be at your death bed? Well, if you continue to sacrifice yourself there, you will be dead and they will not be at your deathbed.

Cindy noted having generally good physical health but began developing significant health issues due to chronic stress while in ministry. A few months after leaving active ministry a medical check-up revealed that all her blood tests returned to normal levels, alerting her how much the congregational dynamics had taken its toll on her body:

> For the first time in my life, I had much higher blood pressure. I was also having digestive issues. So, my doctor was checking me out for IBS and all these things and my back hurt, my feet hurt, my whole body. I was in pain all the time. I thought, do I have some sort of autoimmune disease? I was fatigued. I just had all of these things and I had really high anxiety and I'm not an anxious person generally speaking. I had never experienced anxiety like this before, but I was just constantly activated in that church.

Conceptual Category: Deciding to Leave

The level of agency exhibited by each woman depended on their individual circumstances, but overall, the conditions for most of the women were no longer physically and/or emotionally tolerable. Consistent reasons for leaving included concerns for safety, feeling pushed out or scapegoated, and physical and emotional depletion. The social processes connected to the women's decisions to leave a specific pastoral job or active ministry altogether included *vulnerability in betrayal, throwing my hands up,* and *saving my life.*

Social Process: Vulnerability in Betrayal

The feeling of betrayal was extremely strong for the women, particularly considering the primary dimension of *developing a sense of call* where the women had cultivated a strong understanding of what it means to serve alongside others in a shared community of faith. While many of the women felt that they had realistic expectations of the challenges of ministry, they ultimately were shocked and deeply disappointed by the mistreatment, manipulation, and lack of accountability that occurred within their ministry contexts. Haley, who felt relatively prepared for ministry having been raised by parents who were both pastors, described the feeling of institutional betrayal:

> I think overall one word for it is a sense of betrayal. The vulnerability in betrayal. I just feel like I have been wall-up again and again by challenges that felt very gendered and had a lot to do with being undermined and not taken seriously. I was mistreated in ways that I would not tolerate in any other setting. When I realized that was the case, I saw that the work was costing so much and I could no longer tolerate that. I've worked at a lot of nonprofits and nonprofits aren't perfect. But I just realized, the church is the last place that I should tolerate this kind of treatment.

Jenny, who also felt her leadership was "being undermined," went to a trusted colleague within her denomination whose response felt like the "nail in the coffin" for Jenny in terms of institutional complicity:

> I shared with her how things were unraveling and she said, "You know what? It sounds like some pastoral visits in people's living rooms is what's needed." And that was the nail in the coffin for me on the institution. Here I'm being, I mean abused. That's what I want to say. I don't know if that's accurate, but I feel like I'm being verbally, emotionally, psychologically—I don't know what other kind of word, abused by these people. They are treating me inappropriately. And your response to what I should do is for me to go to their house? And make myself vulnerable in their living room, for what? To receive more verbal abuse from them? Like, what is this?

There was a recognition among the women of the ways in which the church can harm, and how that informed their approaches to leadership. Christy described this awareness, sharing:

> I don't want the church to be an institution who has put someone in a corner and is belittling them and making them feel small. And the church is so good at doing that and I only want to be a part of a church that is expansive and celebrates people for who they are. And so, I think it was a shock to my call as an ordained person. I thought, I'm being taken advantage of because I'm a youth leader and within the structure I have less power. But if I could just get ordained, then I would be in a space within the institution that I could advocate for myself. But the places where I would have advocated for myself and others weren't working, and that's what an institution is. It needs to work or it hurts people. So, I found myself being hurt by the institution in the very way that I don't want the church to be hurting people in the world.

Rose described the sense of betrayal in her denomination's outward presentation of social justice yet inward "antiquated dehumanizing marginalizing system":

> The deeper I got into the system the more I realized that the more things change, the more they stay the same. We were still operating in the same oppressive, antiquated, patriarchal, misogynoir that I knew of growing up. It was couched under this outward social justice beautiful stance, but inward it was still the same antiquated dehumanizing marginalizing system. I suffered in silence. I conformed. And didn't say anything. For fear of retaliation or fear of being blackballed or fear of being ostracized. So, I watched. And in my silence, I became complicit in the behavior. The way I was able to reconcile what I had learned in seminary, unfortunately, was to leave.

Social Process: Throwing My Hands Up

As described throughout each dimension, the women exhibited varying levels of agency and personal decision-making, despite the dehumanizing social dynamics they faced. Self-advocacy efforts were particularly evident when it came to the women's decisions to leave their ministry context or active ministry altogether. Within the emotionally charged contexts of scapegoating and executive derailment, some of the women felt they were unable to leave on their own terms, and were effectively "pushed out" or forced to resign. In these instances, the women felt they ultimately had no choice but to "throw my hands up" and surrender. Kay described multiple issues coming to head during a staff review meeting in which:

> Others were trying to get me to admit I was wrong and I just, the hill I decided to die on was the issue of kids in the sanctuary. I'm never going to ask a parent to remove their child from worship. I'm just not gonna do it.

Kay felt shamed and humiliated as others watched her pack up her office. After "throwing up my hands," she reclaimed her sense of dignity by "stripping the altar" and eating the communion bread:

> I was just like yanked, didn't leave well, didn't say goodbye to anybody. But I was so sick and I was so worn out and I was so done trying that I just I threw up my hands and I said, okay. My parents came to help clear out my office because I couldn't lift stuff because I was still so sick. The church wiped my computer. They felt like they needed somebody on property to watch me as I packed up. It was, it was terrible. So, I left that day. After the last board meeting, I remember thinking, I don't think I'm gonna be here on Sunday and I want my scarves back from the communion table. So, I went up and stripped the altar and sat in the sanctuary by myself eating the loaf of communion bread that I had brought for everybody.

Sandra felt there was simply nothing she could do, once the denominational representative agreed to let the church end her contract:

> The board sent me a letter requesting my resignation during Christmas week, which was in violation of the congregation's constitution. They didn't have the authority to do that without a congregational vote. But the denomination told them that they did. I mean, who can I go to, if the denominational rep thinks that they can do these things, and there's no one else for me to go to, to keep them accountable? And, after very hostile meetings they made very clear that me staying wasn't going to be an option.

Ongoing conflict and verbal attacks became the tipping point for several clergy including Deborah who noted, "It became untenable for me to do that work anymore because of these constant conflicts and attacks. And so, I just resigned."

Social Process: Saving My Life

The process of *saving my life* was a combination of complete and utter desperation in which the women felt that their lives were at risk, as well as a powerful expression of agency. For many of the women there was a realization that there was no defense and no form of protection, particularly with regard to issues of physical safety. Hope resigned from her position because the church was "refusing to take my safety concerns seriously." Similarly, Sarah noted, "It became clear to me that these people didn't have my best interest at heart. No one else is

gonna take care of me in this but me, and that armed guy out in the lobby." Cora described her realization that no one was going to save her and that she had to make that choice herself:

> I remember at key moments this strong desire to be saved, for someone to notice all this happening and to fix it. And to save me. I mean, I saw it play out in my faith, I saw it in my vocation, I saw it play out in my marriage. I saw it play out even in therapy. And I thank God my therapist is the most incredible person who refused to give me advice and tell me what to do. But I realized nobody was coming to save me. I needed to make the choice to save myself.

The need to save oneself was also felt by LaVerne, who retired from the denomination on her own terms and empowered others to do that same:

> I didn't leave, I retired. I waited until the annual denominational meeting and wrote my formal statement of retirement. I said that I did not lose members because I didn't push them away. I didn't steal money because I didn't raise any. I made it sound very, very me. The day I retired, a colleague of mine came up to me, literally crying and saying, "LaVerne, how could you leave me here?" I said, "You can go too." But you know, she's finally at a position years later where she's more seriously considering stepping away because it is becoming finally too much. More than too much.

Rose also used the language "retire" as opposed to "leave," which enabled her to reclaim her voice and agency while at the same time acknowledge how the "ills of the church were impacting me personally":

> At the annual meeting, you heard this big gasp in the room because I didn't tell anyone and I just followed the process for how to state your retirement. And I think everyone was so shocked, they could have objected, but they didn't because they were surprised. And I released a statement, stating that I retired because of the ills of the denomination. It wasn't just bashing and berating the church, there were some great things that came out of it. But I said I was not called to fight those ills that were impacting me personally. So, I had to remove myself and hope that others will find their call to fight the good fight in the denomination. That retirement was a moment of reflection and a moment of regaining my power, my agency, my voice, my call. My body, my mind, my soul, my choice. I reclaimed all of that and left.

Primary Dimension: Reconstituting Self

The final dimension of *reconstituting self* was a central part of the women's experiences, certain elements of which were discussed in the earlier dimensions of *developing a sense of call*

and *differentiating self from system.* However, there were distinct expressions of reclaiming oneself that occurred chronologically after the women left their abusive and toxic ministry contexts. Reflections on the healing and recovery process were non-linear and often brought back experiences and understandings of self from their families of origin, past relationships, faith journeys, and ministry experiences. Each of the participants acknowledged a process of self-discovery and self-acceptance that continues to evolve as they process the impact of their ministry experiences on their personal, psychological, physical, relational, and spiritual lives. Outlined in Table 4.8, these interrelated understandings of *reconstituting self* were expressed through the conceptual categories of *metabolizing feelings, embodying uncertainty,* and *remembering who I am.*

Table 4.8

Primary Dimension: Reconstituting Self

Primary Dimension	Conceptual Categories and Corresponding Social Processes		
Reconstituting Self	**Metabolizing Feelings** • Finding truth in emotions • Recovering from trauma • Letting go of guilt and shame	**Embodying Uncertainty** • Questioning self and identity • Is the church good? • Healing takes time	**Remembering Who I Am** • Unlearning conditioned responses • Tending to what I want • Saving and liberating self

Conceptual Category: Metabolizing Feelings

Social Process: Finding Truth in Emotions

Having dealt with internal messages and external expectations of absorbing others' emotions and minimizing or silencing their own emotional responses, the women expressed how crucial it was for them to acknowledge their own feelings, particularly feelings of anger, sadness, and grief. Through the help of a therapist, Allegra began recognizing and embodying her emotions more fully and honestly:

> I've been having to do a lot of grief work. I was really angry for a long time and I couldn't place why I was feeling so angry. But I find myself finally having to deal with my emotions because I kept just sort of blocking them out, like there's this little box that I had them in. My therapist really helped me to understand that it's okay for you to feel things and to embody that.

Deborah also expressed the need to process feelings of anger and grief, while also accepting the possibility of "alternative endings":

> It's been hugely liberating to not have to craft a self-aware and caring response to parishioners who are actively harming me. I'm just angry about it. The difference now is that, as my therapist has shown me, there's an alternate way for it to end. So, when it was in the moment and it was happening, I'm just stuck there. No one is my advocate. I have no promise of safety or way through that includes anyone else to have my back. And so now that's not true anymore. I don't have any obligation to stay there. I have no investment in the system that does this to women in particular. There's a lot of grief around that too, but I have more freedom to get angry and notice I'm angry and also understand I don't have to be angry anymore.

Social Process: Recovering from Trauma

Most of the women noted some form of professional therapy as being an important part of their recovery, with some women engaging in specific trauma therapy, including tapping, EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing), and trauma-informed spiritual direction. Joanna experienced how the technique of tapping helped "rewire her brain" when she felt triggered while driving past the church:

> I had been able to avoid driving by the church since I left, but one night there was just no way to not drive by the church. And I had a lot of catastrophic thoughts about driving by the church. And there's me in my car thinking, "You're anxious about this but you love yourself and you accept yourself." I went through all my tapping and I made it past the church and I've done it a couple times since then and it's gotten better. Those muscles and that stress response to that congregation have got better.

Marta, who used EMDR therapy while still in active ministry, found it both helpful in processing the trauma of working with a psychologically abusive senior pastor, but also alerted her to the fact that her work conditions had become intolerable:

> I told my therapist and he said, "I've been doing therapy over 30 years. This is one of the worst examples of leadership I have ever heard in my office." He's said, "This is terrible." And we did EMDR trauma therapy over it because it was so affecting me. And that was helpful, but I thought, you shouldn't have to go to trauma therapy because of your head of staff. You just shouldn't.

Social Process: Letting Go of Guilt and Shame

Several women held feelings of failure, guilt, and shame, which they intentionally worked to reframe, particularly as others around them acknowledged their experiences. Kay described feeling like a failure, particularly after hearing from a denominational leader, "I was really excited for your ministry there. I put you there because I thought you would do so well." Kay was able to let go of some of her guilt by surrounding herself with people who know and love her, and who "can see you and remind you who you are." Cora, who felt more isolated in her recovery, was grateful for a team of health care providers who validated her experiences:

> At that time, my relationship with my own personal faith was just destroyed. I mean, I was so low. Nobody was calling me. Nobody had even acknowledged that I had left. I didn't feel like a human, I just felt like this shell of everything I had. That I had failed. That I had not been able to make it. But nobody cared about it. I'm so thankful that both of my health care providers gave me good resources to be able to support me during that time.

Sarah felt that the "nightmare" experience of death threats in her ministry was her fault, but over time came to understand that her desire to care for a parishioner was not to blame:

> For a long time, I really wrestled with, is this my fault? Because I jumped too far in to trying to save this woman. Like what if I had done something differently? Could I have prevented this from happening? And to this day, I wouldn't have done anything different with her. My walking alongside her, my advocating for her, my showing up for her, I wouldn't have done anything different. I don't feel like I crossed a boundary, which then led to this nightmare. The nightmare was him and not because of my actions. I couldn't have controlled what he did. For a long time, I wrestled with what I could have done differently to not become a target. But I was going to be a target regardless.

Conceptual Category: Embodying Uncertainty

Social Process: Questioning Self and Identity

A common experience among the women was a profound existential re-evaluation, one that continues to evolve, in which the women are questioning their sense of worth, their purpose in life, their spiritual orientation and beliefs, their leadership abilities, and their overall identity. Cora spoke of her "entire life being enmeshed in the church," but has found greater peace in the idea of "embodying uncertainty":

> I vacillate between the designation of atheist and agnostic because I just don't think it's that important to know what I believe on any given day. But it's really liberating to not have that be a part of my job. To be able to explore that in my own way, in my own time without having to package it for someone else. Or to not carry the burden of certainty anymore. The idea of certainty was a huge transition point for me. Of being okay with not knowing. Of being okay with not being certain. I think in ministry there was a fear that if I did not embody certainty, that if I did not embody faith fully that there's something wrong. I'm trusting myself to live in this uncertainty for the rest of my life and I think there's something really terrifying about that. There used to be this comfort of certainty and being told that I have a place in this huge thing. And now, that thing is really nebulous, whatever I'm a part of, whatever we're all part of. But I'm becoming more tolerant of the unknowing, and practicing being tolerant of the unknowing.

LaVerne has asked herself difficult questions about whether her time in ministry was a waste but has come to understand her path as always oriented around teaching and equipping others:

> I wonder if I've wasted my life, wasted my education, wasted my time. My mom will often ask me, "Why'd you get all those degrees if you aren't using it?" But if I had done the military for twenty years, you wouldn't be asking me this. Why is this different? Because it's God related? So that kind of gets people off my back sometimes, but I always had the teaching element. I like to equip people with tools that they can utilize to function practically, whether that be spiritually or literally.

Haley described reclaiming her sense of self as no longer needing to "perform femininity" in ways that denied her nonbinary identity:

> Trying to fit less into the box of femininity has been really healing for me. I feel like some of the masking I was doing, performing this role as a young clergy woman, was tied into performing femininity. And it was really soon after leaving ministry that I realized

> that I didn't have to under the circumstances. I didn't have to perform that and I no longer wanted to and I was no longer willing to.

Social Process: Is the Church Good?

The women's experiences elicited different feelings and beliefs around the purpose of the church and decisions regarding their own religious belief and practice. Some no longer identify as Christian and have become more agnostic or non-theist, while others maintain their core beliefs in God while choosing not to participant in organized religion or church culture. Others have taken on an exploratory stance in which they remain spiritually open but in new ways. Joan expressed deep questions around whether the church is "good" and continues to discern whether it's something she will want to engage in:

> My whole spiritual understanding was framed on the importance of the church and living life together, whether I'm pastoring or not. I had a deep love for the church. And so, I started to wonder, is the church good? Then I started to wonder is my faith good? If my faith is founded on following God in community and this is what community looks like when it's trying to follow God, then something must be wrong somewhere in that equation.

Allegra feels that she has been freed from a religious system that she no longer believes in:

> The church is a human construct. And while I strongly believe in the divine, I'm realizing that my understanding of that is very different than it used to be. I feel like I've been freed up to not have to live into should or could or would. Or an orthodoxy that I don't believe in anymore. But instead to be able to experience the divine in a more freeing open way. And also learning that there's possibility in that. But it's scary because it means that you're stepping away from tradition and expectations. But maybe it's time to do that and maybe that's what's happening with other people around me and that's freeing, that openness.

Cindy ultimately realized that the church was never going to change, and that it was herself that had changed, which enabled her to embark on a new personal and professional chapter outside of religion:

> I realized these are things that should not be happening to me and that have happened in various incarnations over and over in multiple churches that I worked in. And I'm just no longer interested in dealing with it. What changed was me, not the church.

Social Process: Healing Takes Time

The women have experienced their healing and recovery as an ongoing process, which they continue to navigate. Joan shared, "I feel like after this number of church abuse cycles, I'm not in crisis about it. I'm just waiting. Eventually, I always I end up with what's next. And I just haven't gotten there yet." Sandra, who worked part-time with an outdoor sporting company after leaving the ministry, found a "graceful place for me to just do the healing that I needed to do":

> They were very patient with me. They allowed me to be my broken self and they allowed me to lead and do some of that like visioning stuff that I know that I'm good at when I was doing a little bit better. It was a very graceful place for me to just do the healing that I needed. Even though a number of the folks there are non-religious people, nobody ever said, "Well, that's what you get for being part of church. You know, this is why the church is so horrible." They respected that it was important to me and they might not understand it but they knew that I needed to figure out how to heal from it without their judgment.

Conceptual Category: Remembering Who I Am

Social Process: Unlearning Conditioned Responses

Several women discussed the process of letting go or unlearning conditioned ways of being and relating to others that they had absorbed within their ministry contexts, as well as through their families of origins and overall societal expectations. Allegra described learning to distinguish between "voices I had internalized for myself" and her authentic voice:

> I'm starting to get into an awareness, in a place where I can fully experience those emotions and not judge or shame myself for feeling them. I definitely had an internal monologue where I asked myself, why are you feeling that way or what's going on? You need to knock that off, you know? Which are not my voices, but voices that I had internalized for myself. I felt like my soul was being chipped away, and I just wasn't able to function. I wasn't acting out of a deep authentic place. I was playing a character, or a role of a person. But it wasn't me.

Vivienne described the ongoing process of rewriting the narrative of "not being enough":

> I think when you are gaslit continuously, when you are beaten down continuously and told that you're not enough, it becomes part of that narrative that's really hard to break free from. I think that's why it's so exciting to see this line of research.

Cora began to question the sustainability of a belief system based on “triumphing over trauma”:

> I think my whole life I have found meaning in triumphing over trauma. I have felt like excelling whether it was in school or whether it was achieving a variety of extracurricular activities. That has been part of my story that I have reflected on. And I think in the church, as an extension of my own faith development, if I just do this right, if I just do this well, God is gonna take care of me.

Social Process: Tending to What I Want

The process of leaving dehumanizing and abusive ministry contexts placed many of the women in a completely new and unfamiliar space of being able to make their own decisions, on their own terms, based on their own unique wants, desires, and preferences. Several women observed how they had to painstakingly re-learn how to make independent decisions that were not restricted by the highly rigid expectations or pressurized context of congregational culture. Jenny described daily practices that helped her identify what she wanted after constantly tending to others’ needs while in ministry:

> I had no sense of my own personal way of existing in the world anymore. It was all conformed. After I left, at first, I felt I needed to have no obligations and just do the first thing that came to my mind and just do that. If I wanted to reorganize my jewelry, just do it and if I wanted to reorganize underneath my bathroom sink, spend the day and do that.

Deborah found it liberating to embrace freedom of thought and expression in her writing, which has become a new vocational pathway for her:

> In my post ministry writing I get really excited when I use profanity or say things that I would never preach in a pulpit. There’s a freedom of thought and it’s not just freedom of expression. I allow myself to think down roads that I wouldn’t have in ministry because it wouldn’t be productive or it wouldn’t feed a sermon or a Bible study or a pastoral conversation. But I don’t have any of those restrictions now and I’m not obligated to stay within anybody else’s boundaries anymore.

Sarah’s work as a hospital chaplain has been extremely healing for her because of the spaciousness it offers for spiritual curiosity:

> I think it helps get me through that trauma. And also, as a chaplain, it's serving in a place where I serve people of all and no faiths. I get to enter into their space without like "Nope, this is how we do it here." So, I feel like a spiritual explorer in a lot of ways. My faith is about wandering and I'm curious and what if, and you don't have to follow the party line.

Since retiring from her denomination, a message that LaVerne has told herself and others is to:

> Remember myself on purpose. That was the one thing that I had lost in a couple of different ways in my life, but just remembering who I am and why I am. That was the most important thing and being okay with that, even if that did not present in the manner that everyone thought it should.

Social Process: Saving and Liberating Self

Beneath the day-do-day experiences of making one's own decisions and reclaiming one's identity apart from the harmful dynamics of congregational ministry, many of the women found within them a powerful capacity to save themselves. With new understandings of both theological and social liberation, the women came to see themselves as their sole and primary advocate in ways that they had not be able to access or promote as a clergy. Cora described her journey of self-actualization as learning "to save yourself," based on a growing sense of her own value and self-worth:

> I realized nobody's coming to save you, Cora. You have to save yourself. Nobody's coming to fix this. Nobody is going to take you away from this and heal everything. You get to decide to do that. And it's stupid how much self-talk, especially as women, we're conditioned to have with ourselves from the time that we're tiny. That it wasn't until I was in my thirties, that I began to have a conversation with myself about my worth and about my value. That it was okay to love myself.

Haley began to find a sense of "wholeness and integrity" within her own body, which she hadn't experienced while in ministry:

> During therapy I had this really deep experience of self. I returned to myself, myself in my intersex body that I had been pushed out of. In my young personhood I had been subjected to these normalizing medical procedures. And I was, I was brought back to myself and my feeling of wholeness and integrity bodily and how I am in the world. And I was no longer willing to deny the okayness of who and how I naturally am.

Rose described the process of "seeking liberation within myself" as a driving force in her path beyond ministry:

> I finally said enough. This is not a womanist tenant. I need to seek liberation within myself. I need to honor myself and love myself. And acknowledge my gifts. And have the agency to decide how I use my gifts. You know, reconciling the Spirit in me and externally what am I called to do, and this is not it. Not in this way.

Dimensional Analysis Summary

This research journey began with the question: What are the lived experiences of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women who have left active ministry because they felt that their interpersonal and professional boundaries were violated or their physical and/or psychological safety was threatened? Over the course of five months, I engaged in 20 in-depth interviews with ordained clergy women who had a strong sense of call and pastoral identity, and recognizable relational and leadership skills. Despite working in denominations with an established history of women's ordination, the women experienced overwhelming barriers to the full acceptance of their leadership as clergy women. Through the process of conducting and analyzing the interviews, I held space for the painful realities that the women experienced, yet also witnessed the powerful self-actualization that took place both within and beyond their ministry contexts.

Through the constant comparative process and dimensional analysis, seven dimensions emerged from the data. The co-core dimensions of *experiencing feminized servanthood as dehumanizing* and *experiencing feminized servanthood as abusive* reflected highly gendered narratives of the self-sacrificial woman, which were intensified by physically and psychologically abusive behaviors in the women's surrounding ministry context. These co-core dimensions influenced and were influenced by five primary dimensions, *developing a sense of call*, *differentiating self from system, exposing vs. protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems, nail in the coffin* and *reconstituting self.* Within each of the primary dimensions were interrelated

social processes, conditions, consequences, and opportunities that revealed varying levels of agency and self-actualization that the women were able to enact despite the intense relational challenges of their individual ministry contexts. The harrowing experiences that the women shared were harmful and debilitating in heart-wrenching ways, yet there was a very evident process of reconstituting self that included self-driven healing and empowerment beyond church culture and ordained pastoral leadership. This dimensional analysis informs the final theoretical model that will be presented in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter presents the theoretical model and five theoretical propositions that emerged from the findings of this study. The theoretical model is derived from the explanatory matrix that featured the co-core dimensions of *feminized servanthood as dehumanizing* and *feminized servanthood as abusive.* During this discussion, I, at times, refer to the co-core dimensions together as *feminized servanthood as dehumanizing and abusive.* However, in doing so, I still maintain their distinctiveness as outlined in the explanatory matrix in Chapter IV. The two co-core dimensions interplay with the five primary dimensions of (1) *developing a sense of call;* (2) *differentiating self from system;* (3) *exposing vs protecting toxic leaders and harmful systems;* (4) *nail in the coffin;* and (5) *reconstituting self.* By way of introducing the theoretical model and subsequent theoretical propositions, two composite narratives will be presented, which illustrate common threads that emerged throughout the data. The composite narratives underscore the consistent social processes revealed in this study, while at the same time acknowledging the highly specific contexts and unique perspectives of each of the research participants.

Following the composite narratives, I will present the overarching theoretical model derived through dimensional analysis and the explanatory matrix outlined in Chapter IV. Following the presentation of the theoretical model is a discussion of five theoretical propositions that emerged from this study. The theoretical propositions will be placed in conversation with key elements of the literature review outlined in Chapter II, alongside additional theoretical concepts that emerged within the data. The chapter will then conclude with discussions on the scope of this study, implications for future research and leadership practice, as well as researcher reflections and conclusions.

Composite Narratives

Offering a composite narrative is a useful way to integrate the extremely layered experiences found within interview research, yet at the same time acknowledges the complexity of the cumulative data (Willis, 2019). With this in mind, I have woven together the varied experiences of the research participants into two composite narratives, representing two distinct pathways that emerged within the data. Identified as Narrative A and Narrative B, these two representations are reflective of multiple women's experiences and identities. My decision to offer two composite narratives is a conscious methodological choice (Willis, 2019) in order to demonstrate the highly sequential journey that the women took to enter, negotiate, and eventually leave Protestant church culture and pastoral ministry. Secondly, the composite narratives illustrate two distinct yet overlapping pathways that emerged within the data, as outlined in Table 5.1. However, it is important to note that while the women's experiences tended to fall into one of these two pathways, there was constant overlap, particularly as the women evolved in their own leadership practice and self-understanding within their pastoral role.

Table 5.1

Comparison of Composite Narratives A and B

Narrative A: Self-Differentiated Scapegoat	Narrative B: Driven to the Edge by Depletion
Reluctant entry into the ministry	Lifelong sense of call to the ministry
Exposure to more progressive theology promoting social justice and equality	Exposure to more conservative theology promoting self-sacrifice and humility
Entered the ministry in mid-thirties with prior professional experience	Entered the ministry in mid-twenties with exclusively ministry experience
Held solo/senior pastor and head-of-staff positions	Held associate pastor or youth/family ministry positions
Ability to self-differentiate and establish boundaries around pastoral role due to executive level position	Less ability to self-differentiate and maintain boundaries due to reduced positional power
More financial security and ability to leave amid congregational conflict	Less financial security and ability to leave amid congregational conflict
Primary leadership approach: decisive, addressing conflict directly, engaging positional power when needed	Primary leadership approach: relational, smoothing over conflict, securing trusted allies due to limited positional power
Leadership ethos: collaborative, mutual accountability, shared knowledge, emotional intelligence	Leadership ethos: collaborative, mutual accountability, shared knowledge, emotional intelligence
Primary dehumanizing social dynamic: escalated scapegoating led by small group of disaffected parishioners with rigid gender expectations	Primary dehumanizing social dynamic: ongoing psychological abuse from toxic senior pastor and complicit church and denominational leaders
Recovery process: Self-doubt in leadership ability, “What did I do wrong?”, disconnecting from religion	Recovery process: Emotional and physical depletion, “Am I the worst?”, wrestling with personal faith

Composite Narrative A: Self-Differentiated Scapegoat

Woman A was loosely affiliated with a Protestant denomination throughout her life but had pursued other professional paths prior to ordained ministry, primarily in non-profit community development. Entering the ministry was not initially on her radar, but her passion for community-building alongside a deep sense of spiritual curiosity eventually brought her to a three-year graduate program at a Protestant seminary. She resonated with the seminary’s progressive theology and community ethos and felt her leadership skills were well-suited for congregational ministry, particularly with her ability to build relationships within

multigenerational settings as well as her expertise in conflict resolution and complex problem-solving.

Based on her significant prior professional experience, Woman A was a much sought-after pastoral candidate and was immediately hired as the solo pastor of a large congregation, where she oversaw other church staff and a variety of programmatic areas. Throughout Woman A's ministry, she was intentional about establishing boundaries around her pastoral role and time availability, particularly after starting a family. As the first woman to hold this position, she began to notice resistance from a few congregants who were accustomed to previous male pastors' constant availability and willingness to involve their families in all areas of church life. Parishioners' anxiety regarding pastoral accessibility was further heightened due to denominational policy changes that required local churches to include maternity leave policies and limit pastoral contracts to a 40-hour workweek.

After a few years, Woman A moved to her second solo pastor position where the congregation expressed excitement about hiring a woman pastor who was also the mother of young children. However, Woman A quickly found that a few older women resented her decision to limit her children's involvement in the church and her inability to attend certain evening committee meetings due to her partner's job schedule. Woman A eventually had a conversation with one of the women, asking directly whether she had offended someone and whether there was anything she could do heal whatever rift existed between her and this group of older women. The woman parishioner shared that people generally thought that Woman A "wasn't pastoral enough" and that she needed to spend more time visiting people in the hospital. Woman A tried to embrace the comments as constructive criticism yet at the same time felt that her intense administrative responsibilities and weekly preaching made it such that she could only

make a few pastoral-care visits a week. She started to feel that she was never going to be enough or do enough to satisfy the congregation's varied needs and that others' expectations of her were becoming unsustainable.

In an effort to develop alternative ministry models that would support the needs of the congregation, Woman A scheduled a special meeting with the church board to explore the possibility of merging with another local church that was struggling to afford their part-time pastor. The woman who had previously confronted Woman A about her availability for pastoral-care needs used the incident to create an incriminating narrative that framed Woman A as a divisive figure in the community, eager to dismantle the church's commitment to family values and unwilling to care for the most vulnerable parishioners. At the same meeting, a male congregant who was the head of the building and grounds committee accused Woman A of misusing the property by allowing "politicized community groups" to hold occasional meetings at the church, despite the decision having been approved by the church board. A handful of others at the board meeting sat quietly as the criticism escalated, yet they were visibly stunned by the accusations that were being made. Woman A maintained her composure, calmly receiving the feedback during the meeting, despite feeling completely annihilated by a community that she had grown to deeply care for.

Over the next few months, commentary began to build around others' perceptions of Woman A's dishonest intentions and incompetence as a leader. While she tried to remain grounded and focused on her pastoral responsibilities, she felt unable to defend herself amid the growing distrust around her leadership. She contacted a retired clergy colleague who had become a mentor to her and described the dynamics she was observing. While he was genuinely sympathetic of her plight, noting that this was not the first time he had seen this happen, he

ultimately advised her to quietly leave and look for an alternative pastoral position in a healthier congregation.

Over the next few weeks, Woman A began looking for a new position and made several strategic steps to resign quietly and with dignity. However, the surrounding spiral of anxiety and blame quickly gained momentum as the small group of disaffected parishioners began to actively scapegoat Woman A in ways that she was completely unprepared for. The male groundskeeper who had initially voiced frustration over what he felt was inappropriate use of the building, met with a few other congregants privately. The group ended up drafting a letter of complaint to the denomination, recommending her removal on the grounds that Woman A was aggressive and controlling and was taking away their voice in church decision-making. In a similar effort to corral others against Woman A, the older woman who had previously expressed frustration over Woman A's intentional boundaries around her family and insufficient pastoral-care visits ended up pressuring several other women to withdraw their membership from the congregation in protest of Woman A's lack of respect for "the way things have always been done."

While Woman A was aware of the dissatisfaction among certain parishioners, she felt completely blindsided by the fury of events happening around her as more and more congregants became swept up in a whirlwind of character defamation against her. Having held significant leadership positions in other professional sectors, she had never experienced this kind of targeting and control of a collective narrative, which she felt did not represent who she was as a person or as a leader. After contacting a denominational representative, she was told there was "nothing they could do," despite having been aware of the growing conflict for months. She was shown the letter of complaint drafted by her most vocal opponents, which for her was the "nail in the coffin." Feeling completely isolated and at a loss of allies in her local congregation, it was at

this point that Woman A expedited her resignation plans. While it wasn't ideal, Woman A and her husband felt they could afford her loss of income if she resigned without having alternative employment in place. She no longer felt she could effectively lead a congregation that had lost faith in her as a leader, even if it was only a small contingent of adversaries. Despite her efforts to build a sustainable community using new models of ministry and community engagement, Woman A felt her leadership and presence was no longer welcome or valued.

On her final Sunday, preaching before a congregation that she felt like she no longer knew, Woman A wondered if it was worth it to have entered the ministry in the first place, knowing it would end in this way. She was horrified by the level of vitriol that swept through the congregation, including people who had consistently affirmed her leadership over the past few years. She felt comfort and validation from several members of the surrounding community who had seen her as a highly respected, bridge-building leader. She publicly communicated that she was voluntarily resigning, but in reality, she felt pushed out by a small but powerful contingent of congregants and complacent denominational leaders.

It took Woman A longer than she expected to recover from the intensity of events that centered around her in those final months. The level of discord concerning her pastoral leadership and personal identity caused her to deeply question the relational bonds that she had built during her time in ministry, as well as evaluate her own competence as a leader. She asked herself for months, "What did I do wrong? Could I have changed the outcome in any way? What was so horrible about my leadership that created such angry opposition?" At the same time, she knew that she had been a highly effective and compassionate leader, with several church members and denominational leaders contacting her in the months following her departure

acknowledging how unhealthy the congregation was, and feeling sorry that they felt there was nothing they could do to support her.

A meager severance afforded Woman A a few months to heal and recover, during which she considered taking a position in a healthier ministry context, but a gut feeling told her to not to pursue it. She ultimately identified feelings of betrayal, having felt that the system she had entered could not and would not ever embrace her identity as a woman leader, particularly one that exhibited healthy boundaries around her personal life and pastoral role. She ultimately decided that she was not willing to fit into a mold that denied her humanity and her understanding of shared communal responsibility and accountability. While she held onto certain core understandings of faith and theology that continued to be important to her, Woman A ultimately decided to disengage both personally and professionally from organized religion.

After four years of processing the grief and sadness of leaving ordained ministry, Woman A has come to terms with how her ministry ended and is now thriving in an adjacent career as a university social worker. She is grateful for the opportunity to apply her pastoral care skills and awareness of interpersonal dynamics, as well as being vigilant of harmful gender narratives that effect women, in particular the women college students that she sees in her new line of work. Looking back, she's grateful she "got out" when she did, even if it wasn't entirely on her terms. She is now extremely proud of how she has reclaimed her identity and her leadership abilities in ways that have been life-giving.

Composite Narrative B: Driven to the Edge by Depletion

Women B felt a call to ministry at an early age, having been steeped in a Protestant tradition throughout her upbringing and having received positive mentoring from an older clergy woman in her local church. During seminary she reevaluated the more conservative theologies to

which she had been exposed and felt prepared to enter the ministry with a deep commitment to social justice and inclusive leadership practices. Having entered the ministry in her mid-twenties, she started as an associate pastor in a large multi-staff church, where she oversaw youth and family ministries. She enjoyed the work of building strong bonds with younger families as well as honing her collaborative leadership skills grounded in empowering others and bringing more voices to the table.

As Woman B's popularity grew within the congregation, and her team-oriented leadership style being well-received by others, the male senior pastor became confrontational, often publicly shaming or blaming Woman B for conflict within the church. Woman B began to endure significant emotional abuse, including harsh criticism of her work that reached a high point as the pastor underwent a difficult divorce. Women B felt like she was the punching bag for all of his emotional insecurities and turmoil within his family. Despite others in the congregation recognizing the senior pastor's harmful treatment, there was a general consensus that the male pastor's charismatic leadership was needed in order for the congregation to survive financially. As a young single woman, Woman B felt trapped as she needed to keep her employment and health benefits. She was not in a position to leave the church without other employment in place. Moreover, she felt deeply committed to her call to ministry and wondered whether dealing with toxic leaders was simply part of the job.

Woman B struggled for months with what to do, seeking counsel from other pastors and colleagues, many of whom said, "I'm so sorry this is happening to you, but this is just a part of the job." Fortunately, Woman B had been seeing a therapist who was aware of the psychological abuse she was experiencing. The therapist asked a simple question that hit a strong chord for Woman B, "Are you happy or are you hurting?" Woman B immediately burst into tears, having

not yet acknowledged the intense physical and emotional toll of working in such a dehumanizing environment. Her own response was just as striking, “I didn’t know that I was allowed to be happy.” In that moment, Woman B made a profound connection between her own mother’s experience as a single mother, working multiple jobs to provide for her children. She had never seen her mother take time for herself or ask herself what she wanted. Woman B realized that she had absorbed her mother’s experience in a way that was now harming her. Upon deeper reflection, Woman B also identified a past history of domestic violence, in which her biological father had periodically returned only to blame her mother for not doing enough. Recalling these memories was incredibly painful for Woman B, but she ultimately began to see parallels between her mother’s experience in an abusive relationship and the larger church system. It felt like a catch-22 in which those who praised her as a model of Christian service were just as willing to demolish her for wanting to be simply treated as a human.

As Woman B tried to find alternative employment as a pastor while still enduring the psychological abuse at the church, she hit rock bottom. After complaining of stomach pains for several weeks, her primary care doctor informed her that she had developed a stress-induced condition that would require immediate surgery. A few church members sent a bouquet of flowers to the hospital with the note, “Hurry back, we miss you!” Woman B felt a strong feeling of disgust as if being lured back into an abusive relationship. Once she returned home, she called the regional denominational representative and requested extended medical leave based on her doctor’s recommendation. She underwent hours of negotiation in order to secure three weeks paid medical leave, which was already part of her employment contract. Such resistance to fair employment practices further alerted Woman B to the ways in which the denominational system promoted an unhealthy model of service and sacrifice, particularly for younger clergy women.

Woman B was unable to secure paid medical leave and instead used three weeks of accumulated sick leave and vacation time, which she never felt that she could use while she was working. During her recovery period, she unceremoniously resigned and never returned to the church. She realized over time that she had absorbed a damaging ethos of martyrdom, to the point that she didn't feel she could use her allotted paid time off or invest in her own emotional well-being despite offering such support to others. Through ongoing therapy, she realized that her sense of self-worth had be compromised by a harmful theology of humility and compulsive people-pleasing. She eventually shared her experience with her own mother, and together they recognized some of the trauma that had been passed down between generations, in which the women in their family had selflessly served others at the expense of their own physical and emotional needs. In addition to unpacking her own personal family history, Woman B began a long journey of rewriting harmful theologies of "bearing one's cross" that had reinforced some of the dehumanizing gender narratives that she had absorbed.

It took Woman B two years before stepping back into a church, and even when she did, she questioned whether she indeed belonged there. She considers herself in a place of spiritual exploration, as she acknowledges that the foundations of faith on which she had built her life and vocation eventually led to personal harm and denial of self. Having moved to another state, Woman B started a new job at a local book store where she continues to heal. She feels relieved to no longer be expected to "be nice" at all costs or to absorb others' emotions, particularly from people who are actively hurting her. She also enjoys being able to close up the shop at the end of the day, and not bring work home or be expected to be constantly available. She's grateful that she left when she did, before she lost herself completely. Woman B is not sure where her life will

lead her, but she's becoming more comfortable with that uncertainty as she attends to her own wants and needs.

Examined together, Narrative A and Narrative B reflect overlapping layers of experience shared by the 20 research participants. Overall, the composite narratives reflect two pathways that emerged in the data: (1) a highly self-differentiated clergy woman who was publicly shamed and eliminated through the process of gendered scapegoating; and (2) a clergy woman with a strong sense of vocational calling and "sacrificial embrace" (Greene & Robbins, 2015) who was driven to the edge by psychological abuse and physical depletion (see Table 5.1 above). These two different trajectories are not mutually exclusive and instead overlap considerably, with most of the participants experiencing a combination of both the dehumanizing process of scapegoating as well as chronic exposure to psychological abuse. Also evident throughout both paths were instances where the clergy woman exercised self-actualization and agency, which was often met with others' intensified scapegoating behaviors and/or psychological abuse. The following section will unpack the theoretical model illustrated by these two composite narratives.

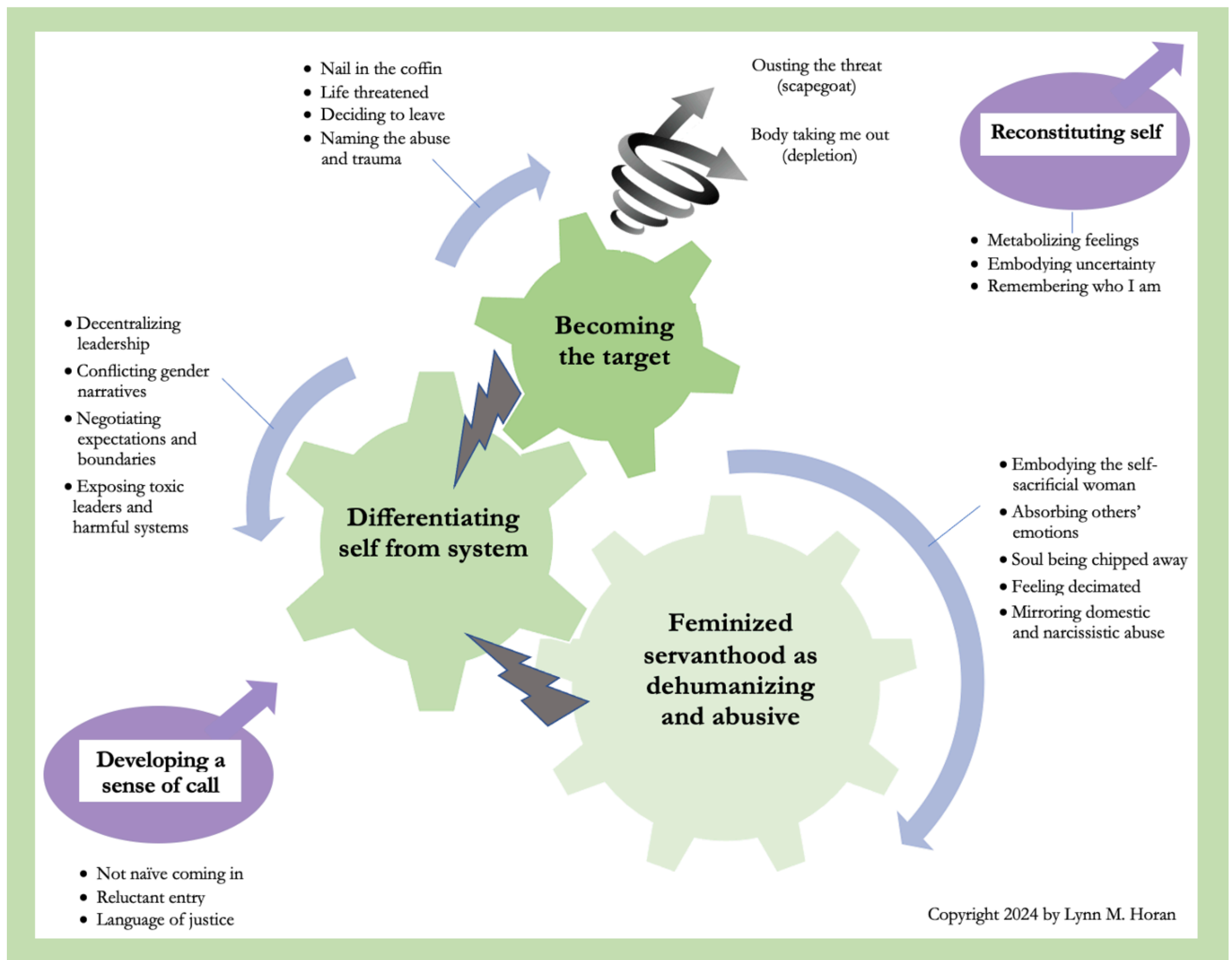
Theoretical Model

As illustrated by the two composite narratives, the women experienced a non-linear although generally sequential movement in, through, and beyond their problematic ministry contexts. The overall chronology of the women's experiences included (1) a sense of being called or drawn into the ministry; (2) experiencing expectations of feminized servanthood that were both dehumanizing and abusive within their ministry contexts; while at the same time (3) consciously exercising identifiable leadership strengths and varying levels of self-differentiation; followed by (4) intensification of psychological abuse and/or scapegoating behaviors; leading to (5) the women's expedited departure from their pastoral leadership position due to gendered

scapegoating or physical and/or psychological depletion. These social processes were identified through rigorous data collection and constant comparison between the interview content, which was further analyzed and interpreted through the explanatory matrix outlined in Chapter IV. As a result of these findings, I have developed the following theoretical model presented in Figure 5.1, in order to reveal a deeper understanding of "What *all* is involved here?" (Schatzman, 1991).

Figure 5.1

Theoretical Model of Feminized Servanthood, Gendered Scapegoating, and the Disappearance of Gen-X/Millennial Clergy Women



The theoretical model illustrated above reflects elements of the visual model of the explanatory matrix presented in Figure 4.2 in Chapter IV. However, there are important added features that reflect the theoretical propositions that will be outlined below. While the explanatory matrix represents a more linear chronological orientation, the theoretical model reflects a more kinetic and pressurized dynamic, depicted by the three gears rotating in opposing directions, increased intensity of color as one moves through the gears, and key friction points between the gears. The use of a gear mechanism is appropriate, as it requires a specific relational orientation between the gears in order for the mechanism to function. Similarly, the congregational conflict experienced by the women was the result of specific relational processes that built off of each other in compounded ways. In addition, there is the potential for friction between the rotating gears, exhibited by the lightning bolt graphics, which depict the increased system anxiety when the clergy women exhibited varying levels of self-differentiation. While the use of the gear metaphor is helpful in visualizing the social processes that took place in each of the women's ministry settings, it is important to reinforce the multi-layered, human-centered nature of this study, as opposed to a mechanical or one-dimensional understanding of the social processes at play.

The three gears represent the co-core dimensions of *feminized servanthood as dehumanizing* and *feminized servanthood as abusive,* the primary dimension of *differentiating self from system*, and the conceptual category of *becoming the target.* I prioritized these three components based on their weightiness and depth within the data, the emphasis placed on these realities within the interviews, and the extensive coding branches that emerged from each. The opposing motion of each of the three gears illustrates the tension and resistance experienced by the women as they negotiated conflicting gender narratives and exhibited varying forms of self-

differentiation. Each of the gears has a cluster of the most prominent conceptual categories and social processes related to each, which were outlined in the earlier explanatory matrix. Spinning out of the third gear of *becoming a target* are the two primary paths through which the women left their ministry contexts. These two pathways are *ousting the threat (scapegoat)* and *body taking me out (depletion),* which are outlined respectively in the composite narratives A and B noted above (see Table 5.1).

Following their dramatic expulsion or debilitating withdrawal from their ministry contexts, the women underwent the painstaking process of recovery, revealed in the primary dimension of *reconstituting self.* As noted in the theoretical model, this dimension included the social processes of metabolizing feelings of betrayal, self-doubt, and shame, embodying the uncertainty of their spiritual, professional, and personal identities, and remembering and reclaiming a sense of self that had been lost, threatened, or otherwise compromised during their pastoral vocation. While the women exhibited important self-actualization and agency throughout the congregational social systems, these social processes grew in clarity and intensity once the women had left their respective leadership positions.

The scope of this study focused on the social process that influenced the women's decisions to leave active ministry. Therefore, the primary dimensions of *developing a sense of call* and *reconstituting self* are intentionally placed on the periphery of this theoretical model. This is not meant to diminish the importance of these experiences, as they were essential for the women in their meaning-making processes, both within and beyond their ministry contexts. These areas of experience included concentrated levels of personal agency, decision-making, and self-actualization, despite the extremely rigid gender narratives and expectations within their ministry contexts. Based on the overall scope of this study, this model situates these dimensions

as an important prologue and powerful epilogue to the more central dimensions of *experiencing feminized servanthood as dehumanizing and abusive, differentiating self from system,* and *becoming a target*

An additional reason for bracketing the primary dimension of *reconstituting self* is to acknowledge the ongoing self-actualization and recovery that is currently taking place in the women's lives, while at the same time problematizing notions of resiliency and grit (Roberts, 2022, p. 186). As will be discussed below in Theoretical Proposition V, the women's process of recovery should not be interpreted as an inevitable journey of finding one's self or building strength of character (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Such oversimplification is harmful, as it places the onus on the women to overcome structural oppression as a necessary element of their own self-realization, rather than critically examining the dehumanizing conditions that necessitated such recovery of self. While elements of recovery and reclaiming of self were evident as both a form of agency and survival while the women were actively navigating their ministry settings, the full expression of *reconstituting self* emerged once the women left their ministry settings. As will be discussed below in implications for future research, the women's experiences of recovery are "unfinished" (Aranda et al., 2012), ongoing, and non-linear, informing the women's future paths in important and complex ways. These realities warrant further longitudinal study, particularly as it relates to religious trauma, psychological abuse, institutional betrayal, and the recalibration of one's life in relation to self and community.

Theoretical Propositions

When placed in conversation with each other, the explanatory matrix illustrated in Figure 4.2 and the theoretical model outlined above in Figure 5.1 together offer the foundation for five theoretical propositions: (1) the shadow side of servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 2002) in the

context of feminized servanthood; (2) reclaiming Gen-X/Millennial women's leadership strengths and embodied leadership practices; (3) perceptions of self-differentiated women leaders as a "dissident daughter" and an "emasculating disruptor"; (4) gendered scapegoating and the disappearance of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women; and (5) reconstituting self beyond "reckoning" and "resilience." Each of these propositions will be described in detail below, alongside relevant literature and theoretical underpinnings drawn from Chapter II, as well as additional supporting social theories.

Theoretical Proposition I: The Shadow Side of Servant-Leadership in the Context of Feminized Servanthood

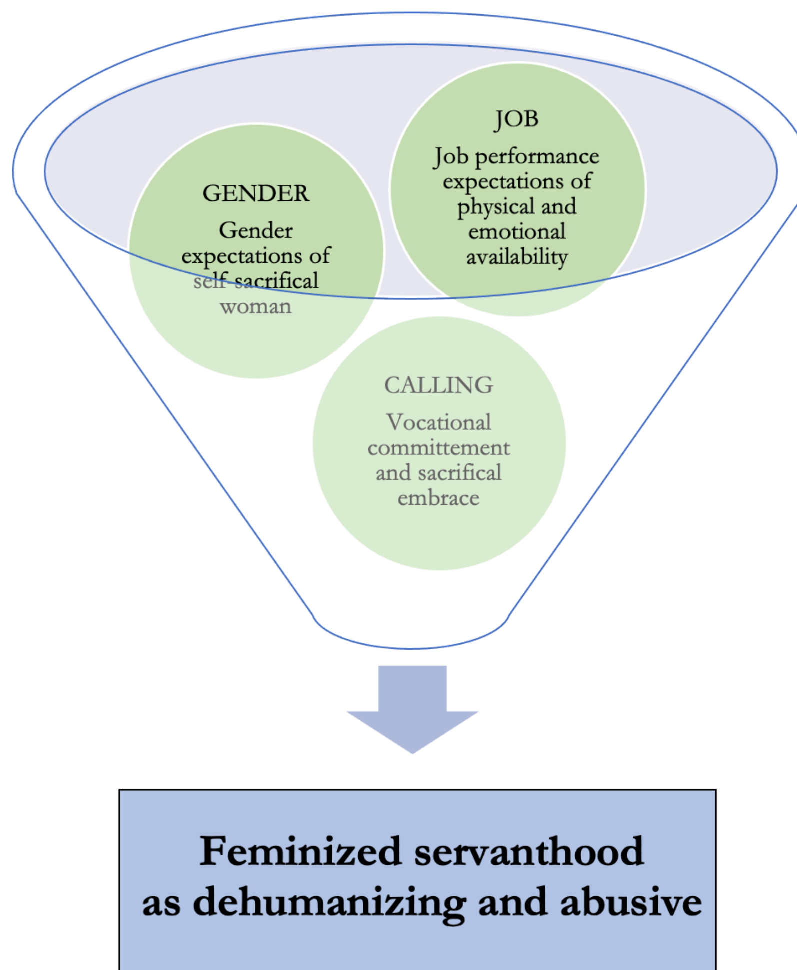
This study revealed the highly gendered nature of service-oriented leadership, which was revealed through the co-core dimensions of *experiencing feminized servanthood as dehumanizing* and *experiencing feminized servanthood as abusive.* These findings revealed limitations to previous understandings of "servant-leadership" (Greenleaf, 2002), particularly as it relates to gendered narratives of the self-sacrificial woman. Initially presented in leadership scholarship as a social good that promotes moral integrity, self-reflective humility, and care for the needs of others both within and beyond organization structures, servant-leadership has the capacity to reorient hierarchical institutions of power toward more human-centered approaches to leadership (Greenleaf, 2002). However, as evidenced in this study, such understandings of servant-leadership are oversimplified and idealized in ways that fail to address imbedded gender narratives of power and servitude (Eicher-Catt, 2005; Reynolds, 2014).

This study revealed the shadow side of servant-leadership through the interplay of three concrete categories including (1) unsustainable expectations of pastoral job performance particularly with regard to physical and emotional availability; (2) gendered expectations of the

self-sacrificial woman, which involved both internalized messages and social conditioning experienced by the clergy woman as well surrounding gender narratives of feminized servanthood; and (3) “sacrificial embrace” (Greene & Robbins, 2015), in which a clergy woman’s own understanding of purpose and calling as a pastor caused her to endure, override, or minimize acute and prolonged exposure to phycological abuse. These three areas are illustrated in Figure 5.2, which highlights how these elements mutually informed each other, ultimately producing the damaging social dynamics of *feminized servanthood as dehumanizing and abusive.*

Figure 5.2

The Shadow Side of Servant-Leadership for Protestant Clergy Women



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The interrelated dynamics of job expectations, gender expectations, and calling or "sacrificial embrace" (Greene & Robbins, 2015) were shared throughout the women's experiences. Cindy described the intense job expectations of emotional availability, noting:

> As pastors, we were taught to be the non-anxious presence and then do our processing apart from that moment and accept that things would happen within us and that was something to be processed on our own. No one else was going to ever alter their behavior. It was always on me, to be the person changing my behavior or at least sort of protecting my own psychological safety.

Deborah described the unsustainability of addressing conflicting congregational needs as a never-ending game of "blind whack-a-mole." In many ways, this image foreshadows the reversed dynamic, in which the clergy women themselves became the targeted "mole" or contagion to remove.

> The people there had such different expectations of me and I was sort of playing blind whack-a-mole trying to figure out what people were expecting, what people were saying, never knowing quite what people needed or just knowing that the needs were different. We had people who expected a community organizer and visionary leader who was always out in the community. But that really rubbed against other people's expectations that I would always be visiting them personally in their home and talking to them on a daily basis and attending to their very constant needs.

As one moves through the pressurized system of feminized servanthood illustrated in Figure 5.2, the second component addresses gendered expectations of the self-sacrificial woman. This element of feminized servanthood ranged from people-pleasing and overfunctioning to feelings of invisibility as the ultimate expression of the self-sacrificial woman. Deborah addressed the compounded dynamic and damaging dual expectations of being a service-oriented pastor and self-sacrificial woman, noting:

> There's this assumption that if you're in leadership in the denomination and especially if you're a woman, you suck it up and take the insult and the stress. And it's your job as a leader to be the one who absorbs it. But it lands more heavily on the women in the system than it does on the men. There's an assumption that the pastor has to suck it up in all these instances of boundary crossing. And as a woman, we're not allowed to say "this is enough."

The combination of service-oriented pastoral leadership and gendered expectations of the self-sacrificial woman was further complicated by the third feature of vocational calling or "sacrificial embrace" (Greene & Robbins, 2015). Briefly outlined in Chapter II, sacrificial embrace points to the tendency for clergy and other caregiving or service-oriented professionals to readily accept, and at times embrace, certain challenges and difficulties within their vocations due to a strong sense of purpose or calling. While this proclivity to endure hardship is not unique

to women leaders in caregiving professions, the acceptance of high levels of personal sacrifice has "particular and more difficult consequences for clergywomen" due to the highly gendered contexts of Protestant church culture (Greene & Robbins, 2015, p. 408). Moreover, there is a willingness based on both self and societal conditioning to override instances of acute and/or chronic psychological abuse, which leads both the perpetrator and the one being targeted to normalize dehumanizing treatment.

The women's experiences of sacrificial embrace included both internalized conditioning from their religious and/or family upbringing as well as external messages from within their ministry contexts. Sarah described the gendered aspects of sacrificial embrace in the midst of not one but two death threats, in which she felt she had to prove her leadership by staying at the church for several more years amid debilitating fear and anxiety:

> I think that's where the gender thing comes in, where somebody has a problem with the female pastor and then she just quits. But this was not minor harassment or somebody not liking my sermon. This was so much bigger and literally life-threatening, but I think, how old was I? I was in my thirties. I thought, no, I'm a powerful young woman, you know? We almost have to be, we have to be invincible to prove our leadership, our worth as a public leader. I look back now and think that's ridiculous but I was still new enough that I didn't want people to think I couldn't hack it. But this is not the situation that they're talking about when they talk about "not hacking it," when there's an attempt on your life.

Similarly, Cindy described her own understanding of purpose and calling as being reinforced theologically in an unhealthy way:

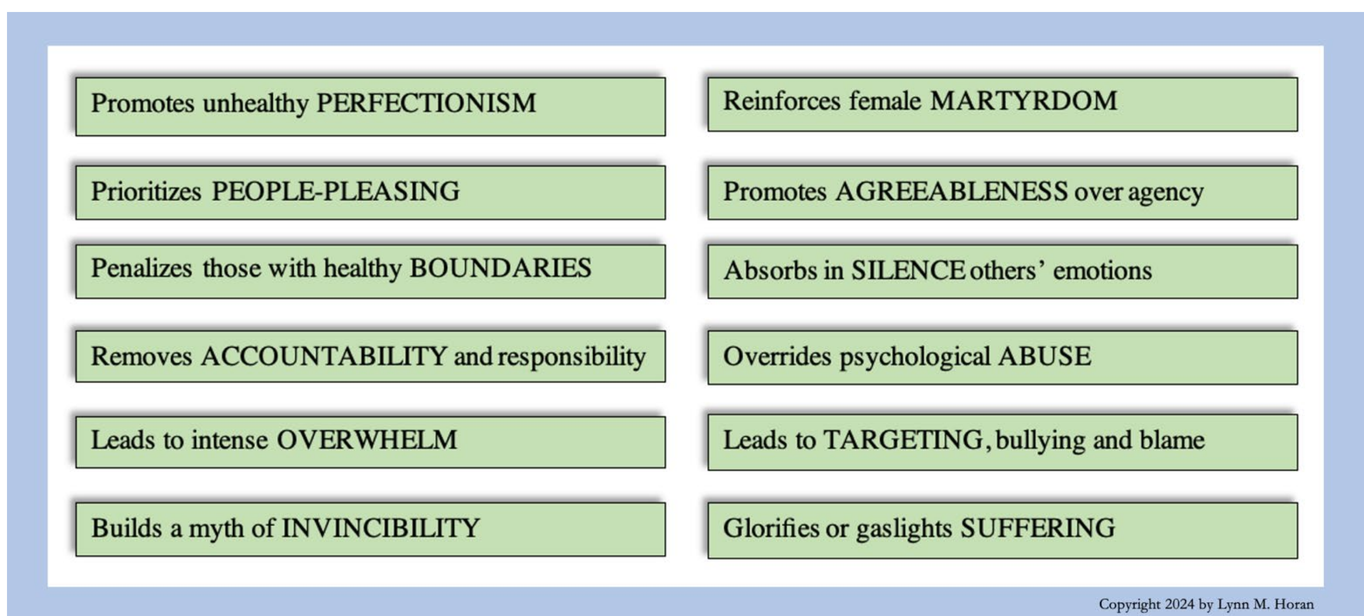
> I didn't grow up particularly religious, so I definitely didn't grow up with that expectation. But in college I had my sort of becoming a Christian moment and I do think some of their attitudes deeply affected me, like being extreme and grandiose and the idea that you should be willing to do anything for the sake of the call. And I really bought into that kind of need to be willing to give up anything. To follow what God wants for me. And even when my theology shifted away from evangelicalism, I think the denial of self had really taken hold of me.

The overlapping elements of service-oriented leadership, female self-sacrifice, and sacrificial embrace placed the women in the impossible and precarious position of never being

able to be or do enough to satisfy the individual needs of congregants within their ministry contexts. As the women negotiated this three-pronged dynamic of feminized servanthood, there was an increasing feeling among the women that the expectations were not only unsustainable physically and psychologically but dehumanizing and abusive in ways that they could no longer tolerate. In reflecting on the explanatory matrix that coalesced around the women's experiences, several important consequences emerged, which further highlight the shadow side of servant- leadership in the context of feminized servanthood. As outlined in Figure 5.3 below, the women's experiences revealed how gendered ideals and expectations of servant-leadership harm women leaders in both religious and non-religious contexts. The language in Figure 5.3 reflects the language and various social processes outlined in the explanatory matrix in Chapter IV. The shadow side of servant-leadership is evident not only in religious contexts with theologically embedded narratives of sacrifice but also non-religious caregiving sectors such as healthcare and education, as well as corporate sectors with highly gendered roles and expectations.

Figure 5.3

Consequences of Servant-Leadership in the Context of Feminized Servanthood



After experiencing the shadow side of servant-leadership through the context of feminized servanthood and the resulting disorientation, dehumanization, and abuse, the women underwent an intense process of reconstituting self, during which they reassessed their understandings of institutional religion and personal faith orientation. After addressing the immediate needs related to their own physical health and post-traumatic stress, the women embarked on the gradual and painstaking process of metabolizing their feelings of betrayal and establishing new understandings of self, spirituality, and community. Through this process, the women underwent various elements of "disenchantment," which Turner (2015) described as a "loss of authentic meaning," a "flattening of experience," and a "decay in aura" (p. 57). Jenny described how over time she came to recognize the abusive nature of congregational ministry in ways that reflect this notion of disenchantment, causing her to deeply question institutional religion and theological belief:

> I didn't identify it at the time because I stayed longer than I should have, to give my family stability. And it was so exhausting. Every board meeting, I just dreaded it and I had to gear myself up. And Sunday mornings were torture, because I feel like what happens to clergy is on a whole other level from any other industry. You can be a woman in the corporate world facing misogyny, but you then don't have to stand up in front of all the people who are treating you like shit on Sunday morning and make yourself vulnerable by sharing your interpretation of a passage they've been reading since they were four. I felt like all I could do was continually offer myself as a lamb for slaughter because I couldn't get away from them. I had to keep standing up there making myself a target every Sunday morning. I felt theologically abused the way I was emotionally, psychologically, and verbally abused by people. And I just wrote it off, just took it. I was taking up my cross.

The women's experiences presented in this study confront the gender neutrality of servant-leadership put forth by Greenleaf (2002). Eicher-Catt (2005) exposed the gendered nature of servant-leadership, revealing that the juxtaposition of the terms "servant" and "leader" lead to a "mythical theology of leadership for organizational life that upholds androcentric patriarchal norms" (p. 17). Feminist scholars continue to critique the inherent gender bias within

models of servant-leadership arguing that the relational focus on down-playing self-promotion and prioritizing forgiveness and "interpersonal acceptance," accentuate gender bias in ways that lead to damaging levels of altruism and selflessness (Reynolds, 2014, p. 42). Promoting narratives of self-denial are particularly harmful for women leaders, especially within social contexts where women have historically been restricted or relegated to caregiving and sacrificial roles. Having discussed the shadow side of servant-leadership as it relates to feminized servanthood, Theoretical Proposition II shifts from conditions to opportunities, illustrating the ways in which the women exhibited agency and meaningful decision-making through their intentional leadership practices.

Theoretical Proposition II: Reclaiming Gen-X/Millennial Women's Leadership Strengths and Embodied Leadership Practices

Within the co-core dimensions of feminized servanthood, there was a consistent thread of intentional leadership approaches exhibited by the women participants as they negotiated and responded to the dehumanizing and abusive elements of their ministry contexts. It was striking to observe the conscious leadership choices made by each of the women, drawn from their professional backgrounds, educational and seminary training, as well as the women's own personal commitments and priorities within their leadership ethos and relational practice. In light of consistent sharing in early interviews of the women's self-understanding of their own leadership strengths, I applied theoretical sensitivity when asking the women to share their specific approach(es) to leadership within their ministry contexts. Allegra described her approach of "reading the room" in a way that promoted collective decision-making:

> Some folks were hard, so how I would work with that is I would use the communal group to speak for something instead of using my own voice. I would check in with the conversation and then I would try to guide the conversation a little bit. But when that person would just be that person, what I found in those situations is that when it came

> from their peers it was a lot harder for them to argue against it. But if it came from me and my voice, it was so easy for them to tear it down.

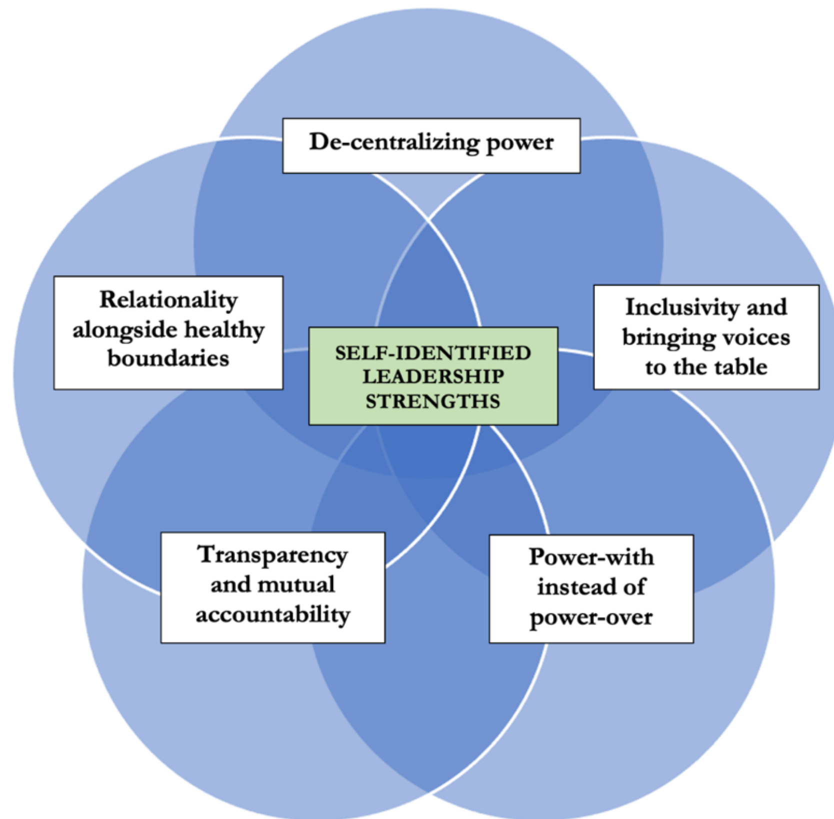
In addition to relational skills that promoted inclusivity and communal decision-making, the women also exhibited conscious boundaries as a form of respectful interpersonal communication and conflict resolution. Melanie described this relationality alongside healthy boundaries in the following way:

> I had a male church member who was very caring and supportive of me who said, "I just want to help you make everyone happy so you can stay here as long as possible." And I started pretty early saying to him, "That's not why I'm here. I'm not here to make everyone happy."

The women's responses revealed several core leadership strengths outlined in Figure 5.4, including decentralizing power, inclusivity and bringing voices to the table, power-with instead of power-over, transparency and mutual accountability, and relationality alongside healthy boundaries.

Figure 5.4

Self-Identified Leadership Strengths of Gen-X/Millennial Clergy Women



The clergy women viewed their intentional leadership approaches as positive community-building skill sets that were generally well-received within their ministry contexts and also critical for their own survival within their surrounding toxic environments. However, the women also felt that their efforts to work collaboratively, de-centralize leadership, and promote mutual accountability were met with significant resistance and opposition. It became evident that those who sought to delegitimize the women's leadership abilities were those who had benefited from patriarchal models of power, ego, and control of a single narrative. While the scope of this study did not include others' lived experiences and perspectives, the participants' sharing provided

consistent profiles of those most likely to reject their leadership, which will be discussed further in Theoretical Proposition III.

While the women saw their leadership approaches as important expressions of self-actualization both for themselves and others, these approaches were also perceived as threatening and destabilizing for certain men and women who preferred more linear, power-over, and historically male-centered leadership approaches. Christy described her approach of "bringing people to the table," which was in sharp contrast to the controlling tendencies of the older female senior pastor she worked with. As an associate pastor, Christy ultimately felt that her desire to promote an inclusive approach to leadership that cultivated a more co-created communal narrative, was perceived as threatening and unwelcome by her supervising female pastor:

> I think she cannot be in a leadership position if she doesn't feel in control of the narrative. And that's why it's not actually based on a specific ethic around an issue either. I think that when she feels she's not in control of something, then she wants to just reject it. So, if she's not in control of the meeting I do not think she has the openness or capacity to learn new things. And that is not a good thing to be as a leader.

Hope described the resulting gaslighting and intense feelings of betrayal that came with being a leader who promoted transparency and mutual accountability within a dysfunctional system that ultimately sought only to protect itself:

> I look at the system in terms of it being narcissistic. It makes you feel like it's this safe space, with all these colleagues that are all in the same boat together and we all have some of these similar struggles. But then the moment that you raise a red flag about something and it happens to be about somebody that they are, for whatever reason, interested or invested in protecting, or maybe friends with, suddenly you're a "persona non grata," and they do what they can to really wear you down and make you question your own reality. You start to think, is it really as bad as I think it is? Maybe it's not. Maybe this is normal. Maybe this is how it's supposed to be. It was just such a cluster-fuck to walk into that and it was disorienting.

In addition to the core leadership strengths shared by the women, and the resulting push-back that many received, the women exhibited highly nuanced levels of embodied awareness. Such embodied knowing was expressed through emotional intelligence and awareness of one's own felt experiences in relationship to others. In addition, the women described feelings of psychological safety and validation versus intense somatic experiences when confronted with others' emotional aggression and direct criticism. While the scope of this research did not directly address elements of embodiment, the women's experiences and approaches to leadership were somatically informed and were strongly reflected in the interview content. Allegra described embodied awareness as something that evolved gradually for her, after addressing her own conditioning to not "take up space":

> It just never occurred to me that I was allowed to have space. I'd been so conditioned to be a helper and to be shadow, to back down. It just never had occurred to me that of course I'm allowed space. That's a basic human right. You're here on this earth. You need space to be you. So, take it.

Embodied awareness also emerged when the women described the lack of psychological safety in their ministry settings, which Elsa described in the following way:

> It was like a pit in my stomach, almost like the bottom was falling out. Like on an elevator whose cable gets cut or if you're on a roller coaster, right after you get to the top and you start the descent. There's this sense of "oh my god," and my hands would get clammy. And it got to where I don't even remember when that would happen. I got so conditioned to it that it didn't surprise me. I felt almost bulletproof because it was just like, you suit up and that's part of the job, I guess. You know, fighter pilots I guess shit their pants regularly when they reach like a certain mach speed. And I felt like at some point it's like, yeah, I'm covered in shit, whatever, that's part of the job.

In exploring the various levels of embodiment, I do not intend to essentialize women as being more feeling-oriented or aware of their embodied experiences than other individuals. However, I do recognize that this was an important element of the women's experiences, which informed their leadership approaches and decisions. This embodied knowing enhanced the women's

leadership capacity and also alerted the women to a “felt sense” (Cornell & McGavin, 2021, p. 29) of when their psychological and physical safety was compromised.

In observing the women’s embodied elements of leadership, the different manifestations that emerged in the interviews reflected Zarrilli’s (2008) four forms of embodiment. Zarrilli’s scholarship is based on the psychosomatic nature of theater performance, in which four overlapping senses of embodiment are exhibited, including “the ecstatic surface, the depth/visceral receptive, the subtle inner body, and the fictive body of the actor’s score,” which together represent the “charismatic body” (p.59). In order to apply Zarrilli’s context of theater, story, and stage to the social dynamics of pastoral leadership, I prefer the term “performing body” as opposed to “fictive body,” in order to situate the women’s experiences beyond the context of theater while at the same time underscoring the various roles they inhabited. The connection between theater performance and pastoral leadership is relevant, as the women’s experiences did involve a kind of performativity, informed by both internal and external expectations of what it means to be a pastor and a woman. The inclusion of performance theory and embodiment within the women’s self-understanding of leadership reinforces the significant overlap between theater and theology, pastoral leadership and performance, observed by Craigo-Snell (2016).

One of the benefits of using grounded theory methodology for this study was its ability to bring to the surface felt and embodied experiences, which may not have been captured as readily in other forms of qualitative research. The women’s sharing regarding experiences of embodiment illustrated how feminist constructivist grounded theory can serve as a methodology of embodiment (Perry & Medina, 2015) that includes embodied research designs (Tantia, 2021). This study unearthed important subconscious and pre-reflective elements of embodied leadership

related to embodied perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) and leader-follower impressions (Ladkin, 2008, 2012; O'Neill, 2018). After I employed the simple follow-up interview question of "How did that feel?" each of the women identified more tacit and insidious gendered narratives and expectations, in addition to the more overt expressions of gender bias within their ministry contexts. The women's attentiveness to their embodied experiences both informed their leadership approaches and also alerted them to concerns of psychological safety and violations of their interpersonal boundaries. These elements of embodied knowing represented a meta-level of engagement that supported and reinforced the other leadership strengths exhibited by the women (see Figure 5.4 above).

When the women later reflected on their recovery process after leaving their problematic ministry contexts, strong elements of embodied self-awareness were evident as the women began to reclaim and revalue their identities as effective leaders and communicators. However, this was by no means a direct and linear process. Instead, each of the women's recovery was fraught with feelings of self-doubt, compromised self-esteem, guilt and shame, which will be discussed further in Theoretical Proposition V. This study calls for further longitudinal research that explores the ongoing recovery period for women leaders who have experienced executive derailment (Ryan and Haslam, 2005, 2007) or "push-to-leave forces" (Dwivedi, 2023), and the long-term process of recovery physically, emotionally, psychologically, and professionally. In addition, the discussion on embodiment invites further qualitative study in the field of gender and leadership that applies methodologies of embodiment (Perry & Medina, 2015) and embodied research designs (Tantia, 2021), in order to explore the deeper nuances of women's lived experiences as leaders.

Theoretical Proposition III: Perceptions of Self-Differentiated Women Leaders as a "Dissident Daughter and an "Emasculating Disruptor"

As outlined in Theoretical Propositions I and II, the women in this study found significant push-back against their efforts to maintain healthy boundaries and received direct opposition to their intentional leadership approaches of mutual accountability and shared power. As the women faced this resistance, it became evident that the conflict went beyond the women's specific leadership practices and reflected deep-rooted opposition to the women's presence and personhood, particularly if they exhibited self-differentiation and agency within their ministry contexts. The women described two consistent profiles of individuals who seemed most threatened, disturbed, destabilized, or otherwise uncomfortable when encountering the women's collaborative leadership practices and expressions of self-differentiation. The following discussion will outline the two primary social dynamics that emerged surrounding resistance to the women's leadership and agency, which I referred to as the *mother-daughter wound* (Hasseldine, 2017) and *disrupting masculinity* in Chapter IV's explanatory matrix. These social dynamics point to two central profiles, including certain older woman with internalized sexism and certain socially insecure men with rigid understandings of their own masculinity. The overlap of these points of opposition significantly affected the clergy women's psychological safety and were the catalyst for the women's eventual removal or expedited resignation from their pastoral leadership positions.

In presenting this theoretical proposition, there are inherent problems with the overemphasis on binary notions of gender and reliance on specific generational categories. The use of binary gender language is not reflective of the more broad and nuanced understandings of gender exhibited by the research participants as well as my own understandings of gender as a

feminist researcher. Instead, the use of binary language reflects the rigid gender understandings and social stratification within Protestant congregational life, which the clergy women navigated, resisted, and at times absorbed, depending on their level of positional power and agency. The social dynamics that emerged in this study were reflective of highly prescribed gender narratives within Protestant church culture, particularly as expressed by older generations of women with internalized sexism and socially insecure men with rigid understandings of masculinity.

It is also important to acknowledge that the scope of this research did not capture the interiority and personal perspectives of those most resistant to the women clergy in this study. However, the deeply relational work of pastoral leadership enabled the women to know certain details of others' self-understanding, which were, at times, communicated through others' own transparent sharing and self-disclosure. This knowledge and awareness helped the clergy women to readily observe interpersonal subtleties and identify possible underlying social dynamics of the resistance they experienced from others. While this knowledge informs the theoretical understandings of the *mother-daughter wound* and *disrupting masculinity*, the conclusions I have drawn are nonetheless incomplete as they do not include first-person accounts from the individual typologies represented. Moreover, due to the often subconscious and tacit nature of embodied perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), it would take a highly nuanced qualitative study design to capture such interiority and deeper layers of perception. I have deliberately stated the tension between the women's clear and concrete descriptions of others' behavior and treatment, and the inability to definitively know the internal motivations and perceptions behind others' behavior. In acknowledging this study's inability to ascertain the inner-thought processes that guided others' outward behavior toward the clergy women, I also firmly support the validity and truth of what the women shared and the harm that was experienced. Throughout the following

discussion I restate this tension, while continually maintaining the legitimacy of the women's accounts and experiences.

The women in this study did not see themselves as being deliberately disruptive or exhibiting dissident behaviors, particularly in light of their intentionally collaborative and inclusive leadership approaches noted above. Instead, the women felt that certain individuals saw them as a "dissident daughter" or an "emasculating disruptor," based on negative perceptions of the women's leadership approaches and incongruency with prescribed gender roles of female self-sacrifice and compliance. Throughout this discussion, I shed light on the fact that neither myself nor the research participants were able to capture the interiority or lived experiences of those individuals who most vehemently rejected the women's pastoral leadership and overall presence. However, each of the women observed that specific men and women who felt most threatened or destabilized by the clergy women made deliberate efforts to privately and publicly undermine the clergy woman's leadership through judgement, control of a single narrative, aggression, and humiliation, leading to acute and chronic psychological abuse, systemic scapegoating, and the eventual executive derailment of the clergy woman. The section below on the scope of this study and implications for future research, will further discuss the inability to capture the interior thoughts of other individuals within each ministry context.

"Dissident Daughter": Unpacking the Mother-Daughter Wound

The women in this study noted intense interactions with specific women parishioners and/or denominational leaders, roughly ages 60–75, who seemed to harbor internalized sexism possibly resulting from patriarchal restrictions of agency, choice, and voice within their own lived experiences. Certain women who exhibited this background may have perceived a more self-differentiated and agentic younger clergy woman as a threat to her own gender narrative

and, as a result, actively participate in delegitimizing the clergy woman's leadership. The research participants identified certain women in this demographic as actively targeting, bullying, and/or scapegoating the clergy woman. Allegra described how the familial dynamics of congregational ministry reinforced a parent-child dyad and the social process of *gendered infantilizing* outlined in the explanatory matrix, particularly as it relates to the role of the oldest daughter:

> In my own family, I functioned as a third parent in my household to my younger siblings. So, people in church identify that pretty quickly. They could sniff it. So, here's an oldest daughter coming in, you know, it's different than the guys, right? She can help us but she can also fit into these roles that we have in our own families and our own system. What becomes a complication is that when I have to exert authority as a daughter, it becomes a cognitive dissonance, because children 'aren't supposed to speak out against their parents.' At least in some contexts, right? Many contexts. When I would exert authority, that's when things would get mean and nasty.

Several women described behind-the-scenes letter writing campaigns in an effort to remove the clergy woman from her pastoral positions, a process that was often led by a small group of women who strongly opposed the clergy woman's leadership approach. Melanie described this dynamic as a conflict between her more agentic leadership style and the gendered expectations of certain older women in her congregation:

> Her complaint was always, "Well, Melanie is not very warm and fuzzy." When she called one day, she was so excited that I was baking cookies. But I don't just bake cookies all the time. I actually do the job of being the pastor. And she actually called the district superintendent and had one of them to come and meet with the staff parish relations committee because well, she never really specified why. And that woman eventually wrote a letter as part of a larger campaign to try to get me moved to a different church, and almost all those letters came from women.

If one applies Hasseldine's (2017) work on female intergenerational conflict to the context of Protestant church culture, there appears to be conflict over whose needs should be satisfied: the self-differentiated clergy woman who maintains healthy and appropriate boundaries in relation to her pastoral role or the woman parishioner whose own internalized sexism prefers

that the clergy women uphold a certain gendered narratives of deference, compliance, and availability. Hasseldine (2017) outlines this mother-daughter relational dynamic stating:

> When the language that inquires after what women feel, think, and need is not spoken in a family, culture, and society, mothers and daughters are set up to fight over who gets to be heard. When emotional needs are ignored, mothers and daughters argue over whose needs get to be met in that relationship. (p.4)

The resentment that certain older women parishioners projected upon younger clergy women may be grounded in their own feelings of disappointment and lack of fulfillment in their own personal lives as well as prevailing gender expectations of the self-sacrificial woman within their own generational experience. This dynamic is further reinforced by what has been recently termed the "human giver syndrome," which Nagoski and Nagoski (2020) defined as the phenomenon whereby certain individuals and identities, namely women of childbearing age, are expected to "give to humanity through their time, attention, affection and bodies" (p.xiii). In social systems that perpetuate a heteronormative ethos with high expectations of gender-role congruency (Eagly & Karau, 2002), those who deviate from the gendered expectation of the female giver, such as young self-differenced women clergy, experience social rejection and punishment.

Mother-daughter conflict, which in recent years has been referred to as "the mother-daughter wound," is prevalent in societies where younger women exercise significantly greater autonomy and self-differentiation than previous generations (Hasseldine, 2017). In social contexts where there is less symmetry or mirroring between mothers and their adult daughters, older women may feel resentment, anger, and frustration. When examined further, older women who themselves have experienced gender oppression and have, as a result, absorbed certain gender role expectations, enter a kind of rivalry or competition with younger women who have greater social mobility. It may be difficult for some to imagine this mother-daughter tension

being played out within the context of congregational life, due to the public and communal nature of church life as well as the assumption that there is a distinct boundary between the role of pastor and the surrounding congregation. However, to the contrary, there is a deeply private and intimate side of congregational life in which familial relationships are played out in powerful ways, which consistently blur the boundaries between pastor and parishioner (Breakey, 2021, Jagger, 2021; Page, 2016; Roberts, 2016). The small close-knit nature of individual Protestant parishes have a striking resemblance to nuclear family structures where mother-daughter tensions are actively expressed.

Over the past few decades, understandings of self-differentiation as outlined in relational cultural theory and family systems theory have become foundational to interim ministry training, where clergy learn how to address toxic and dysfunctional relational patterns within congregations, especially during times of transition and conflict (Breakey, 2021). However, what is absent from such training and related literature is an observance of the ways in which the familial nature of congregational life specifically contributes to intergenerational conflict between older women and young clergy women. In addition, while there is much research in the field of psychology as to the fraught nature of the mother-daughter relationship within nuclear family settings, such knowledge and observations have not yet been applied to the relational tensions between Gen-X/Millennial clergy women and their older women colleagues and parishioners.

The emphasis within relational cultural theory on the empathetic dynamics of mother-daughter relationships is an important counterpoint to long-standing developmental models that prioritized independent, self-oriented achievement (Jordan et al., 1991). However, this earlier research has the potential to idealize the empathetic mother-daughter bond and insufficiently

address the unique aspects of intergenerational conflict between mothers and daughters. Stiver (1986) highlighted two co-existing realities in which the highly permeable boundaries between mothers and daughters contribute to girls and women developing more relational selves. At the same time, there is an ongoing cycle in which a mother may resent her daughter's process of self-individuation just as the daughter rejects the engulfing mother and her lack of differentiation (p. 9). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the more complex and often fraught reality of the mother-daughter relationship, which can manifest within intergenerational female leader-follower relationships. As Jordan (1991) notes, "If there is not appreciation for the development of more complex differentiated patterns of connection and intimacy, then the relational aspect of the definition of self will continue to be inadequately understood and devalued" (p. 68). The dynamic of separation-individuation is an ongoing struggle within human psycho-social development, which continues to play out in intergenerational female pastor-parishioner relationships. As this study revealed, there is a growing trend in which Gen-X/Millennial clergy women are met with significant criticism and rejection by specific older women church members, clergy, and denominational leaders. Aspects of relational cultural theory, family systems theory, and the following discussion on mimetic theory and human needs theory, are useful theoretical lenses through which to unpack this social dynamic of intergenerational conflict between women.

Conflict within the mother-daughter relationship is an historically under-researched area of inquiry. As Hasseldine (2017) argues, there is societal shame and avoidance both within private interpersonal relationships as well as in the fields of psychology and clinical counseling, which has prevented formal exploration of the mother-daughter wound and its impact on familial and work-place dynamics. A possible explanation for the systemic silencing of this topic is

societal shaming in which women and surrounding public discourse have diagnosed this relational conflict as "women's own pathology, rather than the result of generational patriarchal patterns in family, culture, and society" (p. xvii). The application of relational cultural theory, family systems theory, and recent explorations of intergenerational conflict between women, shed light on the often subconscious and pre-reflective emotional landscapes that effect the psychological safety of Gen-X/Millennial women leaders. This more nuanced approach draws upon the foundational work of embodied leadership and perception, discussed in Chapter II. These areas of exploration are important to consider within the context of Protestant church culture and other related work environments where conflicting gender identity narratives, intergenerational conflict, and high levels of boundary permeability create a precarious leadership for younger women leaders.

"Emasculating Disrupter": Destabilizing Narratives of Masculinity

The second typology of individuals who were most critical of the clergy women in this study were certain male clergy, denominational leaders, and parishioners, who demonstrated specific narratives of masculinity. The men that the women described represented a broader range of ages, roughly ages 40–75, as compared to the specifically Baby Boomer generation of women noted above. The clergy women identified the men's oppositional behaviors as being possibly rooted in social insecurities, for which the men may have been overcompensating by portraying various levels of masculine authority and control. There was a common feature in the interviews whereby a male parishioner who was critical of the woman clergy had some kind of emotional instability in his personal life, such as a neglectful childhood or conflict in his personal relationships and/or marriage, which in some cases influenced specific drug or alcohol addictions. These details were often readily known to the clergy woman, having provided

pastoral care to male parishioners in which these more private aspects of self were disclosed and directly communicated. There was also a professional and economic component, whereby a disaffected male parishioner with job insecurity, unemployment, or other financial struggles was more inclined to project emotions of distrust and anger toward a young woman clergy who exhibited pastoral authority and healthy boundaries. Cindy described a passive-aggressive male parishioner who threatened her in lengthy emails:

> After I confronted him about these terrible emails, he said "I hope you won't be sharing this with anyone else." And I was like, "Oh, I absolutely am," and I copied the personnel committee in on that so fast saying, 'This is what he's been sending me for five years. This is the way that he talks to me. We need to stop this.' So, then he blew up, resigned from the church board, stomped off like a toddler, said he would never be back and then kept showing up at church because he had keys to the building. He would show up at church when I was the only one there. And I never felt safe with him. He had a really violent temper. I had the building re-keyed and he showed up and couldn't get into the building and threw a huge temper tantrum. He spread around to all these people that I was trying to turn on him.

In terms of male clergy and denominational leaders, there was a display of toxic masculinity demonstrated by aggression, anger, and punishment of the clergy women. This was particularly evident in the experiences shared by Sandra, Christine, and Vivienne, each of whom worked under older male senior pastors who exhibited extremely dehumanizing and psychologically abusive behaviors. Hope described an incident in which an older male clergy felt intimidated by her, was unsuccessful in belittling her, and ultimately transferred his feelings of emasculation onto another woman staff member:

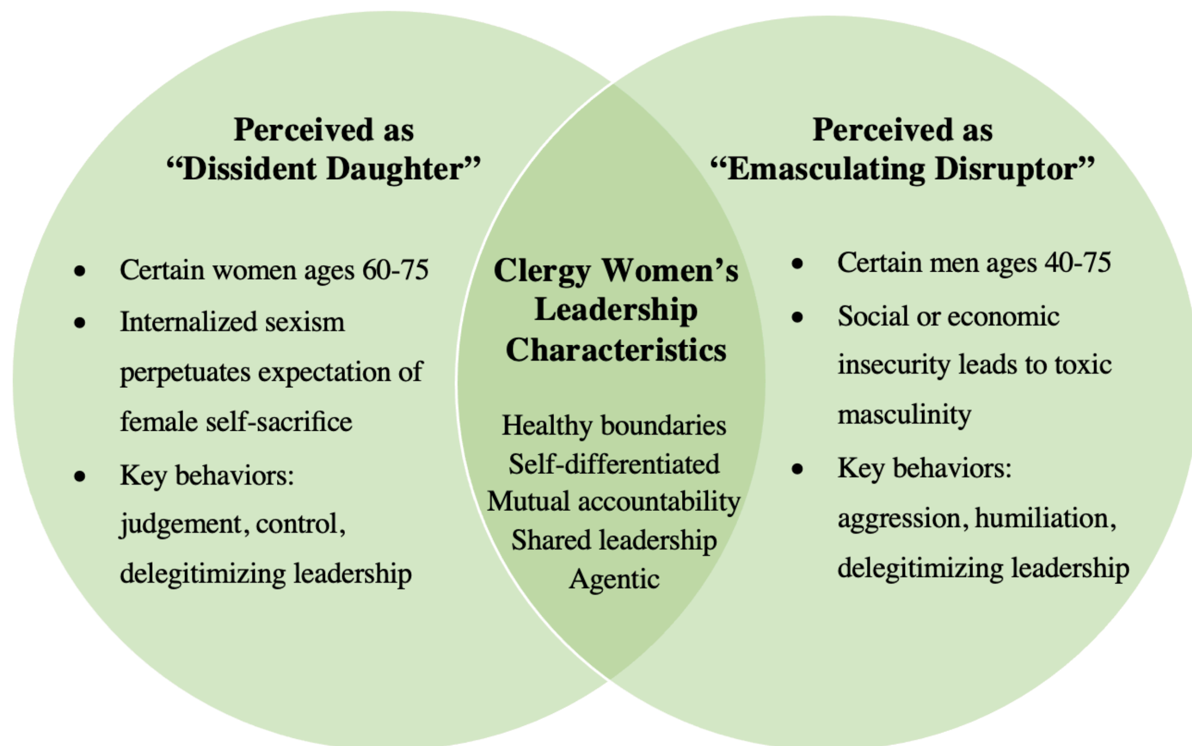
> He finally said, "Well, you're right. I just have to admit you intimidate me." I said, "Well, that's a you problem, not a me problem." And we get done with him admitting that he's intimidated and he comes out of the office and goes to our new youth director. He starts telling her how she can do the children's sermon better. It was just this ridiculous thing and I went out and looked at him like, really? This is how you're choosing how to respond to me intimidating you? You're gonna try and intimidate the youth pastor so you can still feel like some big strong man? Or whatever was going on there. And he sees me staring at him like that and he just turns around and he walks away. And I looked at the youth director, and her eyes were just like, "What the heck was that?"

> I just said, "That wasn't about you. That was about me. So don't take any of that to heart." And I turned around and walked away.

This dynamic points to possible overcompensation of feelings of insecurity, in which men who felt intimidated by the clergy women's agency and autonomy responded with efforts to denigrate, humiliate, or otherwise silence their clergy women collogues, particularly those who were associate pastors. Overall, it appeared that certain male parishioners, clergy, and denominational leaders, who felt emasculated by intelligent, self-differentiated, well-respected younger clergy women, tended to adopt accusatory and scapegoating behaviors in order to uphold a particular male identity narrative of control and authority, which they may have been deprived in other areas of their life. Figure 5.5 illustrates the two profiles of individuals described above, who exhibited the most resistance to the clergy women's leadership and overall personhood. While these profiles were consistently described throughout the interviews, it is important to reinforce that this study did not and could not capture the lived experiences and internal thought processes of the individuals described. Further discussion on the scope of this research and implications for future research are described below.

Figure 5.5

Perceptions of Gen-X/Millennial Clergy Women as a "Dissident Daughter" and an "Emasculating Disruptor"



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The application of social attachment theory offers great insight into the interiority of those who tended to reject the clergy women and their expressions of agency and autonomy. Frost (2019) explained that attachment theory in family of origin systems and early caregiver relationships has a strong effect on relational conflict skills both in childhood and in adulthood. Those with histories of emotional neglect and unresolved relational trauma are likely to exhibit attachment deficiencies at various developmental stages, including poor conflict-resolution skills later in life. Such unmet emotional needs are often the very thing that draw individuals to seek affirmation within faith-based communities, both as pastoral leaders and as parishioners (Reiss,

2015). As this study revealed, the women clergy observed behaviors in certain individuals that pointed to potential areas of emotional neglect, social insecurities, and harmful gender narratives, particularly with regard to toxic masculinity and expectations of female subservience and compliance. Anxiety regarding the women's agency appeared to be a strong contributing factor to the lightning rod effect (Jalovec et al., 2011) and deep-rooted conflict with regard to human identity needs (Redekop, 2002), which will be outlined further in Theoretical Proposition IV and its discussion on gendered scapegoating.

Through an exploration of relational cultural theory (Jordan et al., 1991), family systems theory (Jalovec et al., 2011), intergenerational conflict (Hasseldine, 2017), and attachment theory (Frost, 2019), there appear to be two primary conflicts over gender-identity narratives within Protestant church culture as it relates to the psychological safety of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women. First, a pervasive mother-daughter wound (Hasseldine, 2017) seems to exist whereby certain Baby Boomer women, both clergy and congregants, hold a negative perception of younger clergy women who exhibit self-differentiation and healthy boundary-setting practices. Conflicting values and expectations over female self-sacrifice, physical and emotional availability, and gender-role congruency (Eagly & Karau, 2002) resulted in certain older women perceiving younger clergy women as a kind of "dissident daughter." Alongside the intergenerational conflict between older women and younger women clergy were certain male parishioners and pastors whose self-understanding of masculinity was threatened by clergy women who exhibited agency, autonomy and mutual-accountability. As a result, such parishioners and pastoral leaders seemed to view Gen-X/Millennial clergy woman as an "emasculating disruptor." While the women in this study did not seek to be intentionally disruptive, their very existence and desire to lead in collaborative and agentic ways activated

feelings of resistance among individuals with more rigid gender identity narratives. As a result, distorted narratives and negative perceptions regarding the identity and leadership practices of the clergy women in this study, led to a highly unstable social system that delegitimized and ultimately derailed the clergy women, despite their otherwise effective and well-respected leadership and relational practices.

In addition to interrogating the use of binary language, as noted earlier in this section, it is important to problematize the emphasis on generational identity, particularly among certain parishioners in the Baby Boomer generation. Current scholars of generational theory resist oversimplified categories of generational identity. Duffy (2021) pointed to a "generation myth" and argued that generational identities are not fixed but fluid and reforming throughout our lives. This premise is reinforced by the fact that many older men and women embraced and supported the self-differentiated identities, flexible gender narratives, and collaborative leadership approaches exhibited by the women. However, in the case of the profiles described above, there was also strong rigidity when it came to generational identity and engrained gender role narratives, which resulted in others' negative responses to the women's leadership and personhood.

Theoretical Proposition IV: Gendered Scapegoating and the Disappearance of Gen-X/Millennial Clergy Women

The negative perceptions others held of the clergy women's presence, personhood, and overall leadership approach, set into motion instances of blame, bullying, and targeting, which significantly threatened the women's physical and psychological safety and interpersonal boundaries. As outlined in the explanatory matrix in Chapter IV, the conceptual category of *becoming the target* was exceptionally strong, with the women using a variety of different

images and powerful in-vivo language. The general phenomenon that the women experienced involved a small group of individuals "spiraling" or "corralling" in an effort to "get rid of" the clergy woman, having been identified as the source of congregational conflict and therefore the sole recipient of blame. The process of "scapegoating" was described in several ways by the women, with impactful images that connoted violence and sacrifice. Elsa described her and other young clergy women's experiences of being treated as the "whipping girl" in their respective congregational systems:

> I worked with a spiritual director for years who worked with lots of other female clergy and she said "Every woman pastor I know [from this denomination] is treated like a 'whipping girl.' She is being harmed intentionally by her congregation and by the larger [denominational] system." And I struggle with that and yet I believe it. Young clergy women are seen as a whipping girl for the congregation. Everyone's anxiety about church growth, about decline, about a legacy, about, even the inherent punishment or shame dynamics within their faith narrative, is taken out on women. Men are elevated and exalted. Women are the paschal lambs.

Kay experienced a similar dynamic in which she became the "lightning rod" for the congregation's anxiety about finances and the inclusion of children in worship services. She described an escalating "anxiety spiral" and the moment she felt the "pitchforks were out," alerting her to the fact that she had become the target of the congregation's unresolved conflict and tension that existed well before she arrived. She ultimately felt she had to choose which "hill to die on," as the reactivity against her left her no defense or possibility of resolution.

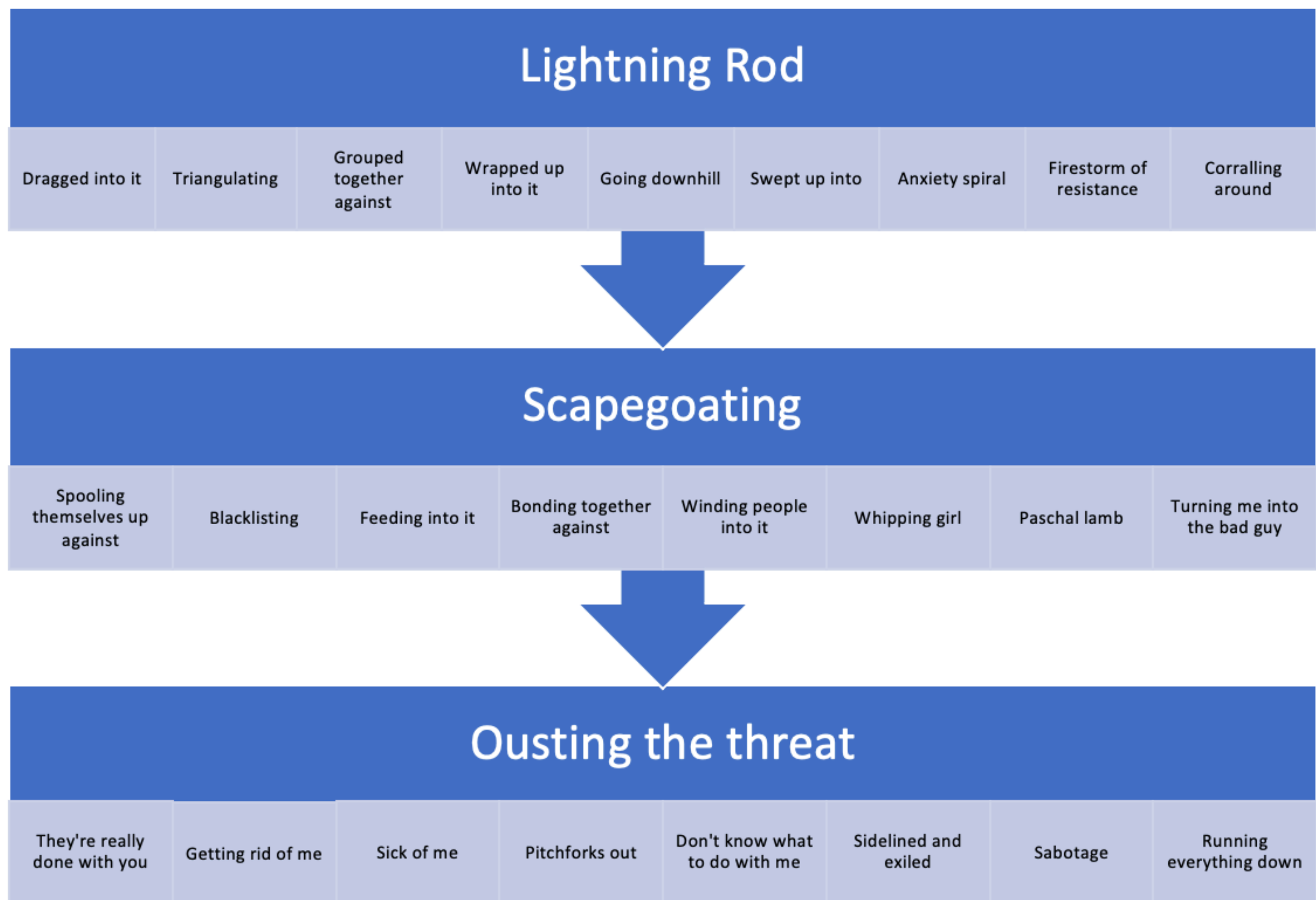
While the language used by the women consistently pointed to a scapegoating mechanism, I maintained strong reflexivity in order not to impose any theoretical understandings or assumptions upon the interview process. It wasn't until the final interview that I applied theoretical sensitivity and asked Sandra to expound upon what she described as ongoing manipulation and blame:

> He needed a scapegoat for his bad behavior and that became me. The concept of scapegoating is that the responsible person doesn't have to have any consequences to their actions and that all of it gets passed off on to another person. When he finally resigned, all of the reasons for it somehow became my fault. I was the only one left and he had told them all it was my fault and they just took his message word for word. I had to carry the blame and burden of his misconduct, which I hadn't even known about for sure until the day that he resigned. In the moment it was very disorienting. All of the sudden these people who I thought that I knew and who I thought trusted me were accusing me of things that I had never done.

The process of *becoming the target* built upon already existing psychological abuse related to feminized servanthood and took on a more ominous tone that was extremely aggressive and at-times life threatening. It became evident that there were three levels of escalation, as system anxiety swelled around more self-differentiated clergy woman. As outlined in Figure 5.6, the three sequential stages included *lightning rod, scapegoating,* and *ousting the threat,* which are supported by the women's in-vivo language. The explanations used to justify such treatment included accusations of the women's financial misconduct, mental instability, and micro-managing, each of which were inconsistent with the women's self-understanding of their leadership and their otherwise positive reputations within their ministry contexts. As outlined in Theoretical Proposition III, others' scapegoating behaviors were grounded in broader negative perceptions of the women as a "dissident daughter" and "emasculating disruptor," despite the use of alternative justifications and cover stories. As noted previously, the women themselves did not enter these spaces of leadership with a desire to intentionally disrupt or rebel against established community and social norms. To the contrary, their approaches to leadership were deeply relational, collaborative and inclusive, while also promoting mutual accountability and upholding healthy and appropriate boundaries.

Figure 5.6

In-Vivo Language Representing the Lightning Rod Effect, Scapegoating, and Ousting the Threat

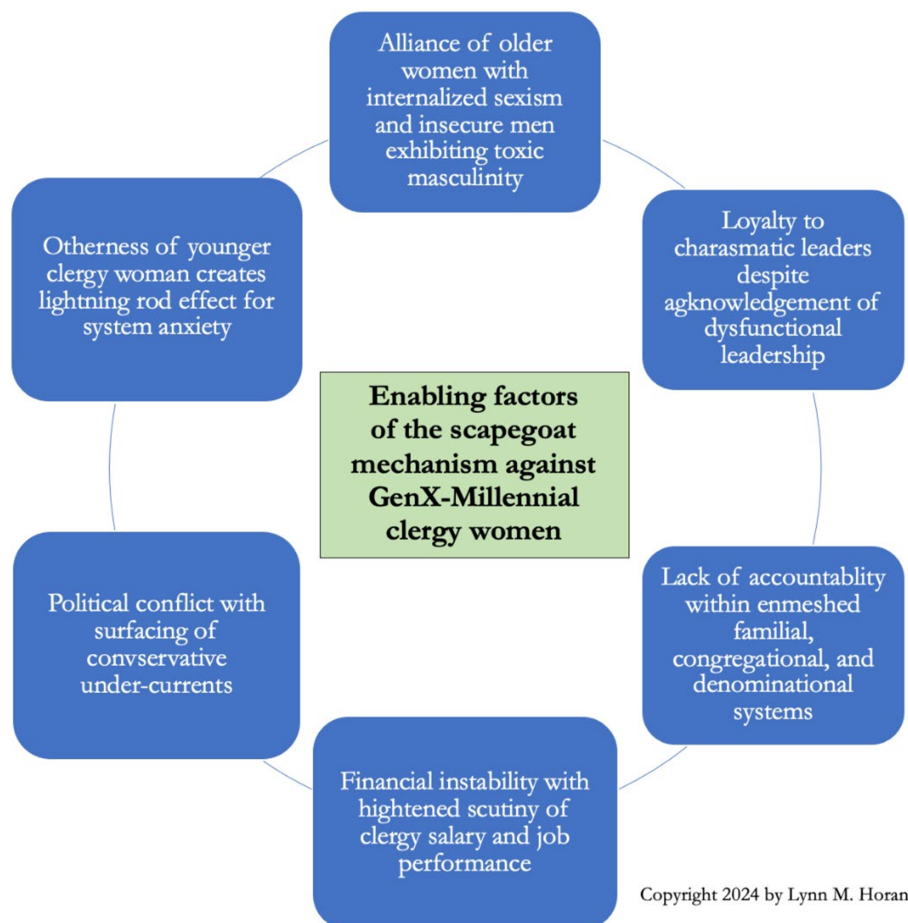


As revealed in the women's experiences, the primary catalysts for the scapegoating mechanism were the two profiles outlined in Theoretical Proposition III, including older women with internalized sexism and insecure men with self-understandings of authoritative masculinity. However, what enabled the scapegoating mechanism to build momentum and legitimacy without resistance was the inability of the surrounding social system to hold the smaller group of disaffected leaders and parishioners responsible for unjustly shifting blame onto the targeted clergy woman. As outlined in Figure 5.7, the women described several enabling factors that

caused the scapegoating mechanism to proceed unchecked: (1) loyalty toward a charismatic leader despite acknowledgement of the leader's abuse of power; (2) the familial nature of Protestant church culture and parishioners' desire not to implicate their close friends, or denominational leaders not wanting to undermine their professional colleagues; (3) not wanting to admit or address the church's financial instability and shifting blame to clergy whose salary drew the majority of church funds; (4) political conflict within the church system that revealed conservative undercurrents, particularly with regard to inclusivity of LGBTQ+ individuals; and (5) the perceived otherness of self-differentiated of young clergy woman creating a lightning rod effect that magnified system anxiety.

Figure 5.7

Enabling Factors of Scapegoating Mechanism against Gen-X/Millennial Clergy Women



The combined effect of these factors created a perfect storm that centered around many of the clergy woman, making it difficult for them to both defend themselves personally and professionally or find sufficient pathways of institutional advocacy within their congregations and larger denominational systems. The women felt extremely blind-sided and disoriented by the scapegoating mechanism that was activated around them and were often not fully aware of what was happening amid the building tension. Likewise, those surrounding the scapegoating

mechanism may not have been entirely conscious of what they themselves were participating in, therefore contributing to the unchecked momentum of this destructive social process.

Mimetic Theory and the Scapegoating Mechanism

In reflecting on the escalating social conflict surrounding the leadership and identity of self-differentiated Gen-X/Millennial clergy women, the findings of this study strongly align with the basic premises of mimetic theory and the scapegoating mechanism, outlined by French cultural theorist René Girard (1966, 1977, 1986, 1987). A highly nuanced and interdisciplinary theory, the central argument is that human beings are both imitative and rivalrous. Those who we seek to imitate can become our rivals, which can result in intense conflict and violence. Girard (1966) argued that what we want or desire does not simply emerge within ourselves as autonomous individuals, but is a social process whereby our desires are inspired by or modeled after the desires of others. The term “mimetic” points to this imitative tendency within human social behavior. Mimesis often operates relatively peacefully among persons in a relationship with clear hierarchy such as parent-child or teacher-apprentice. Such relationships involve a safe psychological distance between persons, which ideally promotes non-competitive, learning interactions. Mimetic desire can also promote social cohesion when the teacher or model is removed either historically or spiritually, for example the relationship between Jesus and present-day Christians or Martin Luther King Jr. and present-day racial justice advocates (Frost, 2021). However, when boundaries and social distinctions are more blurred and the proximity and similarities between subject and model become more closely related, such as Protestant pastor-parishioner relationships, there is increased potential for what Girard (1966) referred to as mimetic rivalry.

Following an initial period of mimetic rivalry is an escalation of interpersonal conflict that ultimately leads to the scapegoating mechanism. Girard (1966) noted, “It is not simply or only that we desire another’s possessions, but rather we come to desire the being of another” (p. 83). This intensity of needing to be, become, possess, or control the model reflects much of what the clergy women described as they were surrounded and targeted by a small group of opponents. The women described specific individuals trying to publicly devalue or denigrate them, having been perceived by some as a threat or contagion within the larger community. Building on Girard’s mimetic theory, the expulsion of the scapegoat leads to a period of superficial peace through a kind of cleansing or harmonizing ritual. As Fleming (2014) noted, “In a situation of heightened sensitivity to mimetic suggestion and burgeoning conflict, an accusatory gesture is all that is required to unite (and hence to reconcile) warring parties around a common enemy” (p. 4). This was consistent with the women’s experiences, as there was no formal discussion or process of accountability within the congregational or denominational systems leading up to or following their exits.

While the women’s experiences reflected a chaotic and disorienting experience, Redekop (2002) argued that the scapegoating process is not accidental, with the identity of the scapegoat being far from arbitrary. Redekop (2002) offered five specific qualities which scapegoaters either consciously or unconsciously observe in a potential scapegoat and are used to guide and/or justify the scapegoater’s behavior and accusatory narrative. These scapegoat qualities include: (1) perception of difference, otherness, or alterity; (2) perceived difference is felt as a threat to one or more human identity needs with an individual or group of individuals; (3) the scapegoat has some level of power, whether that is in the form of a leadership position or unique identity, which enables the scapegoating process to have an impact on the crisis; (4) the scapegoat must

also be considered illegitimate, in terms of their positional or symbolic power, so that the scapegoat action appears justified; and lastly (5) the scapegoat must be vulnerable and unable to counterattack or seek reprisal, revealing the injustice of the scapegoat mechanism (p. 92).

These scapegoat qualities are by no means meant to excuse the scapegoating behavior or justify the blame placed upon the scapegoat. Instead, these qualities point to the distinct social dynamics surrounding the scapegoat's perceived identity and role within the surrounding social system. When applied to the context of Protestant church culture, there is a hyper-mimetic nature to parish ministry due to its high boundary permeability, thick climate of conflicting gender narratives, emotional projection of parishioners, and expectations of feminized servanthood. This creates an extremely precarious environment for self-differentiated women leaders and increased potential for the scapegoating mechanism against Gen-X/Millennial clergy women. As outlined in Table 5.2, Redekop's (2002) scapegoat qualities aligned with the identities of the Gen-X/Millennial clergy women in this study, which further reinforced the potential for systemic scapegoating.

Table 5.2

Application of Redekop's (2002) Scapegoat Qualities to Gen-X/Millennial Clergy Women

Scapegoat quality	Application to clergy women
Observance of **difference**	Age, gender, firmer boundaries than previous generations of clergy, decentralizing approaches to leadership
Difference perceived as a **threat**	Increased autonomy and boundaries threaten certain individuals who maintain strong gendered expectations of the self-sacrificial woman and its overall function in maintaining church culture
Position of **power** via leadership role and/or unique identity	Clergy role signifies educational, spiritual, theological, and positional power, privilege, and prestige
Considered **illegitimate**	Positional power and decision-making capacity conflicts with gendered narratives of women's relationality, compliance, and passivity
Vulnerable with no available recourse	Ineffective or nonexistent congregational accountability structures, complacent denominational leadership, and church-state separation prevent judiciary buffer against scapegoating mechanism

The observance or perception of difference is a key element of justification for those who engage in scapegoating behavior. However, a compelling argument of Girard's mimetic theory is that the catalyst for the scapegoat mechanism is not a menacing difference but a threatening sameness. Girard (1986) presented this more nuanced understanding of social conflict stating that "persecutors are never obsessed by difference, but rather by its unutterable contrary, the lack of difference" (p. 22). Girard's original premise was that what we lack in our own sense of being, we seek to fill by attaining what others' have or becoming who they are. Such role models are not threatening if they remain at a safe distance, or if there is a firm social hierarchy in place, such as in a teacher-student relationship (Frost, 2021). However, when there is closer proximity between the model and subject, such sameness or similarity in identity threatens to overtake what limited being the subject seeks to protect. Reineke (2009) applied this understanding of a threatening sameness to gendered violence noting that those who are perceived as different "are reproached for being not as different as expected or, in the end, for differing not at all" (p. 249).

If one applies to this study Girard's assessment of an encroaching sameness, the Gen-X/Millennial clergy women were not different enough to remain safely apart from their antagonists and instead, their sameness threatened to overwhelm their opponents and overtake their own limited sense of being.

This study revealed that mimetic rivalry and the subsequent scapegoating mechanism is based on a complex tension between sameness and difference. The scapegoating of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women is not just a conflict of difference between men and women, or younger women and older women, nor is it strictly a question of sameness in terms of the clergy women mirroring qualities that a proximate person may long for in themselves. Instead, this study reflected Reineke's (2009) analysis of social violence as a "conflict associated with a lack of being" (p. 249). The tension between sameness and difference surfaced in various ways, depending on the identity of the subject. For specific older women who rejected the clergy women in this study, what appeared to be most threatening was the physical sameness of another female-bodied individual, yet one with a greater sense of autonomy and agency. For specific men, the threatening sameness may have centered around the women's self-actualized leadership capabilities, qualities that the men felt should have been reserved for them but which they may have lacked in their own personal lives. In both cases, the interiority of these individuals was out of reach within the scope of this research. Nonetheless, this study illustrated that the most vocal opponents of the clergy women expressed a dangerously fragile sense of self. As a result, their limited sense of being may have felt stifled or eliminated by the presence, personhood, and agency of a younger self-differentiated woman leader. The reflection of someone who was similar to them, yet who exhibited a more fullness of being, magnified their own deficiencies and lack of wholeness. Therefore, the younger clergy women represented someone that their most

vocal critics longed to be or become, and the proximity of that possibility yet impossible attainment necessitated the rejection and subsequent removal of the clergy women in order to preserve one's own limited sense of self. This understanding of a loss of being due to a threatening sameness helps to explain the drastic shift that took place for clergy women who were well-respected and, in many cases, beloved by the larger congregation and surrounding community, but who eventually became vilified and derailed by a small disaffected group of parishioners and denominational leaders.

Human Needs Theory and Deep-Rooted Conflict

The application of human needs theory to Girard's (1966) understanding of the scapegoating mechanism, offers an important glimpse into the subconscious needs of those who engage in or enable scapegoating behavior. As noted in Theoretical Proposition III, the scope of this study did not capture the inner thoughts of those who exhibited scapegoating behaviors. However, the following discussion on human needs theory, as well as the earlier discussion on social attachment theory (Frost, 2019), sheds light on observations that the women had of others' behavior. Initially introduced by psychologists Maslow (1943) and Sites (1973) with their work on ontological needs, Burton (1987) later applied human needs theory to deep-rooted social conflict. Separate from biological or substantive needs, such as food, water, and shelter, human needs point to self-growth and the development of personal and social identity. Potapchuk (1990) distinguished between these two forms of need, noting that biological or substantive needs do not require human interaction, whereas human or instrumental needs require relationality and include such needs as control, identity, recognition, power, and security (p. 265). Burton (1987) concluded that when these human needs are threatened, people engage in what is known as

deep-rooted conflict, which offers an important intersection with mimetic theory and the scapegoat mechanism (Redekop, 2002).

The interplay between mimetic theory and human needs theory is a useful lens through which to view the relational dynamics within Protestant church culture, due to its familial nature, porous boundaries, and the prevalence of unmet human identity needs (Redekop, 2002). Individuals participate in spiritual or faith-based communities, consciously or unconsciously, due to unmet human identity needs, which an individual hopes a faith community and/or pastor can fulfill (Weber, 1963). The complex social and existential needs present within faith-based communities are addressed by Reiss (2015), who observed that religion accommodates the values motivated by sixteen basic desires of human nature, including power, independence, curiosity, acceptance, order, saving, honor, idealism, social contact, family, status, vengeance, romance, eating, physical activity, and tranquility (p. 17). Reiss argued that these desires can be manifested in individuals with opposite personality traits, which further complicates pastor-parishioner relationships and congregational conflict.

The social conflict surrounding Gen-X/Millennial clergy women indicated that the women's own identity and personhood was a site where conflicting psychological and human identity needs were actively negotiated. As discussed in Theoretical Proposition III, certain older women may have had a human identity need for the younger clergy women to mirror their own gender narratives, particularly as it related to notions of the self-sacrificial woman. Similarly, certain men who may have been overcompensating for emotional insecurity through expressions of toxic masculinity, may have had a human identity need for female subservience and compliance in order to fulfill their need for social power and control. Both of these profiles appear to hold a self-identity that required that the clergy woman reflect elements of feminized

servanthood and fulfill the role of the self-sacrificial woman. Moreover, these individuals may have felt threatened, triggered, or activated by younger clergy women who were unwilling to conform to that particular gendered narrative. As noted earlier, I exert caution in my discussion on the psychology of individuals who were not interviewed for this study. Nonetheless, the women's shared experiences and their intimate knowledge of others' personal histories and emotional landscapes, revealed social dynamics within their ministry contexts that were fraught with unmet attachment needs (Frost, 2019). Based on the intense reactivity of certain individuals, it appears there was a strong desire to satisfy certain human identity needs (Redekop, 2002) for female subservience, through possessive control or silencing of self-differentiated clergy women. Such expectations of female servitude and self-sacrifice were inconsistent with the leadership practices and self-identity of clergy women who exhibited strong boundary-setting practices and agentic leadership approaches.

Due to the inextricable connection between human needs and identity formation, when one's human identity needs are threatened or human need satisfiers are taken away, there is a strong propensity toward frustration, anxiety, and in some cases physical violence. Moreover, deep-rooted conflict occurs when the values associated with specific identity needs of a group are violated (Redekop, 2002, p. 24). Burton (1987) argued that human beings will instinctually resist behaviors or social environments that will destroy or otherwise compromise their human identity needs. This feeling of desperation and defensiveness may have fueled the various attacks and dehumanizing treatment that each of the women encountered from their most vehement opponents. The agency, autonomy, and collaborative leadership approaches of the clergy women in this study, may have threatened older women with internalized sexism and self-understandings of female self-sacrifice, just as the clergy women may have been perceived as threatening and

disruptive to insecure men who may have had the need to promote a self-narrative of controlling and authoritative masculinity. Both of these typologies of individuals appeared to have a human identity need for compliant younger women, which was not satisfied by the relational practices and leadership approaches of the women in this study. Further discussion on the scope of this research will be included below, which addresses the inability of this study to fully capture the lived experiences, interiority, and human identity needs of those who felt most threatened by or oppositional toward the clergy women in this study.

Feminist Critical Analysis of Mimetic Theory

While both Girard's (1966, 1977, 1986, 1987) original work in mimetic theory and Redekop's (2002) application of human needs theory offer important insight regarding the subconscious elements of deep-rooted conflict and systemic scapegoating, neither of these paths of inquiry explored the role of gender within interpersonal conflict. Girard sought to present mimetic desires and the scapegoating mechanism as a phenomenon that functioned irrespective of gender divides, revealing that all individuals are capable of scapegoating as well as being vulnerable to being the scapegoat (Eggen, 2013, p.189). However, an important advancement has been the work of Girardian feminist scholars such as Reineke (1990, 1992, 1997, 2014), Adams (1993), Novak (1994), Weir (1996), and Rike (1996), who have explored the ways in which social constructions of gender influence the scapegoating process. More recent advancements in Girard's original theory include Reineke's (2014) exploration of familial trauma, Moore's (2021) research on White supremacy and racial violence, and Frost's (2019) exploration of attachment theory and relational conflict. This study of Gen-X/Millennial women leaders also offers an opportunity to apply feminist-critical mimetic theory to the field of gender and leadership, which will be addressed in the following section on implications for future research.

While Novak (1994) argued that androcentric interpretations of mimetic theory have the potential to re-victimize women by silencing their experiences, Rike (1996) problematized assumptions that women can only be victims and not perpetrators of scapegoating. This observation is reinforced by the fact that certain older women clergy and parishioners appeared to actively participate in the scapegoating of the clergy women in this study. Rike points out that while women have been scapegoated throughout history, "Not all women end up as victims of violence and the rituals constructed to appease it, nor do women remain simply victims of the tides of violence: many repeat the cycle of victimization and themselves become perpetrators" (p. 22). This is particularly true when applied to the mother-daughter wound described above, in which older women's internalized sexism appeared to manifest in negative perceptions of the younger clergy woman as a "dissident daughter" in need of reprimanding. However, as Hasseldine (2017) pointed out, such resentment on the part of certain older women is not necessarily grounded in malicious intent but is more likely influenced by their own lived experiences of being restricted and silenced by systemic gender oppression in their own lives.

While the application of mimetic theory is not restricted to religious contexts, there is a strong precedent for the use of mimetic theory to examine socio-religious dynamics, particularly when it comes to patriarchal social systems with strong sacrificial theologies. A powerful example of this is Reineke's (1990) analysis of the gendered scapegoating that drove the Salem witch trials in seventeenth-century New England, in which women who were widowed or did not have male heirs were violently targeted as their more independent social status threatened traditional land inheritance practices and amplified surrounding religious and economic anxieties. Reineke's observations provide a chilling connection to the systemic scapegoating of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women in contemporary Protestant church culture, where younger

clergy women's increased agency and autonomy threaten persistent cultural narratives of female servitude. While I found this to be a striking comparison, it is important to acknowledge that while gendered scapegoating of self-differentiated women leaders is heightened within socio-religious communities with rigid gender norms, such scapegoating behavior also exists in non-religious contexts, which will be discussed in the section on implications for further research.

Feminist scholars have remained somewhat distant from Girard's work, not only because of its decidedly White, male-centered roots but also its potential alliance with Christian exclusionism. Such association with stringent religiosity is largely due to Girard's later commitment to Catholicism and his belief that Christianity offered the ultimate pathway to non-rivalrous mimesis through the unique revelation of "the God who reveals himself to be the *arch*-scapegoat in order to liberate humankind" (Williams, 1996, p. 263). However, this particular theological application of mimetic theory is only one facet of the otherwise broad and interdisciplinary field of mimetic theory. As noted below in implications for future research, feminist-critical mimetic theory is a useful lens through which to examine gender-based conflict, rivalry, and scapegoating in both religious and non-religious professional settings and familial relationships.

Feminist treatment of mimetic theory has a vital capacity to unveil the silencing, secrecy, and shame associated with the scapegoat mechanism within highly patriarchal social settings. Exposing the social processes involved in scapegoat expulsion makes it such that the human community can no longer claim naivete from or abdicate responsibility for the violence that underlies socio-religious ritualization (Novak, 1994, p. 22). Instead, as Rike (1996) asserted, feminist scholarship holds a mirror before us all as to the ways in which we perpetuate, even if

passively or unconsciously, the scapegoating mechanism. While this seems to reinforce Girard's initial intent behind a gender-neutral social theory, feminist Girardians reveal that the omission of gender has the potential to revictimize any identity who experiences systemic othering. As Novak (1994) argued, feminist application of mimetic theory is critically important as a pathway toward giving voice to the scapegoat herself as it "focuses upon the retrieval of the victim from her second victimage, that is, from the relegation of her experience to the abyss of silence" (p. 23). The findings of this study strongly support the need to center the voices of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women who have experienced his form of gendered scapegoating, as well as self-differentiated women leaders in non-religious contexts with persistent patriarchal narratives.

Gendered Scapegoating of Gen-X/Millennial Clergy Women

Having outlined Theoretical Propositions I, II and III, and a feminist critique of mimetic theory and the scapegoat mechanism, the process of gendered scapegoating is an important lens through which to understand the rejection of the self-differentiated Gen-X/Millennial clergy women in this study. The theory of mimetic rivalry and the subsequent scapegoating mechanism provide a valuable basis on which to understand the tendency for (1) certain older women with a possible history of internalized sexism; and (2) insecure men who may be overcompensating for their own emotional insecurities, to aggressively and accusatorily seek to push younger, agentic clergy women out of their respective ministry contexts. Moreover, resistance to the boundary-setting and collaborative leadership practices of younger women clergy, revealed intense social conflict around the human identity need for expressions of feminized servanthood. Returning to Girard's (1966) original premise that mimetic theory is based on our desire to acquire what our rival has or is, it appears that female autonomy and agency was the object of desire and therefore catalyst for mimetic rivalry between the clergy women and their most

vehement opponents. Human identity needs for power and agency on the part of certain congregants and denominational leaders may have required the perpetuation of ingrained gender narratives of the self-sacrificial woman. Such narratives and human identity needs were potentially threatened by the clergy women's expressions of agency, self-differentiation, and decentralized leadership approaches. For a small group of disaffected congregants and denominational leaders, the clergy women's resistance to the imposed gender narrative of feminized servanthood turned her into a threat or contagion that certain individuals felt needed to be eliminated.

The scapegoating mechanism in Protestant church culture involved only a small group of disaffected parishioners, church staff, and complicit denominational leaders, who relied consciously or unconsciously on the scapegoat characteristics described above in Table 5.2. As mimetic tension built, the scapegoating contingent sought to expose the illegitimacy of the clergy woman's otherwise positive reputation. Redekop (2002) described this process as "demystifying the model," in which the subject/parishioner makes a point to discredit the model/pastor by insinuating that the model is "not so great after all" (p. 79). As revealed in the women's interviews, scapegoaters sought to make concrete accusations against each of the clergy women, often alleging the clergy's financial misconduct or mental health instability as the primary concern. However, Girard (1987) argued that it is the model's own self-possessed nature, perceived autonomy, and overall confidence that most upsets the scapegoating contingent, due to their own feelings of insufficiency or emotional neglect. For the scapegoater, demystifying the model means questioning the model's belief in her own happiness or self-sufficiency (pp. 378–379). In conservative religious contexts, anxiety about women's autonomy is directly expressed through overt sexism and sexual harassment of women clergy as well as formal denominational

rejection of women’s ordination (Rocca, 2023). However, in mainline American Protestantism where gender equality is generally promoted and women’s ordination is well-established, anxiety regarding women’s agency and autonomy is expressed through more insidious forms of systemic scapegoating, executive derailment, professional defamation, and institutional gaslighting.

The scapegoating mechanism within Protestant church culture is often left undetected due denominational complacency and ineffective accountability structures, as well as the separation of church and state, which prevents these discriminatory behaviors from being publicly addressed. In light of these persistent yet often silenced social dynamics, it is important to shed light on these realities in order to more effectively advocate for Gen-X/Millennial clergy women who are currently experiencing this level of dehumanization and abuse. The human proclivity toward mimetic scapegoating is played out in direct and indirect ways in both conservative and progressive religious communities, as well as in non-religious culture and leadership contexts. Further application of mimetic theory within scholarship on gender and leadership, particularly in non-religious contexts, will be discussed in the section on implications for future research

Theoretical Proposition V: Reconstituting Self Beyond “Reckoning” and “Resilience”

The final theoretical proposition of this study situates the primary dimension of *reconstituting self* as a complex and multi-layered experience that points to certain elements of institutional reckoning and individual resilience, while at the same time problematizing both of these concepts. I have chosen the two terms “reckoning” and “resilience,” because they are often used within the context of social justice and trauma recovery, but are dangerously problematic and incomplete. The following theoretical proposition situates the clergy women’s experiences of *reconstituting self* in a way that acknowledges the women’s reality of victimization and exposes the dehumanizing treatment they endured, while at the same time honoring the women’s desire to

move beyond victim mentality in ways that do not inappropriately glorify or celebrate the experience of resilience.

"Reckoning" the Costs for Clergy and Congregations

The term "reckoning" has entered public discourse in important ways over the past few years, particularly in relation to increased awareness and social activism regarding sexual abuse and harassment (Hirshman, 2019) and racial justice (Norris, 2020). A reckoning literally means a "settling of accounts," often in terms of a business or legal transaction. However, when it comes to the lived experiences of individuals who have endured social injustice and dehumanizing abuse, the idea of a reckoning is not as cut and dry. As Norris (2020) pointed out with regard to increased attention around racial injustice, "A reckoning by definition refers to the moment when we finally deal with an ugly situation. It is more than just admitting that there's a problem." Norris (2020) urged those involved in the work of social justice to use the word "reckoning" with caution as it can inaccurately, and in some cases dismissively, assume that the work has been accomplished. Hirshman (2019) used the term reckoning as an "epic battle" as she outlined the history of litigation against perpetrators of sexual abuse and harassment, while at the same time acknowledging the need for continued advocacy work and public awareness.

With these understandings in mind, the experiences of the women in this study depicted neither a final "settling of accounts," which assumes that the realities have been sufficiently addressed, nor an "epic battle," as the women are currently prioritizing their own personal paths of recovery as opposed to addressing the issues of institutional betrayal in a formal organized way. As Cindy noted, there was a need to move forward in her life rather than reforming an institution that she no longer wanted to engage with:

> I realized these are things that should not be happening to me and that have happened in various incarnations over and over in multiple churches that I worked in. And I'm just no longer interested in dealing with it. What changed was me, not the church.

Haley described no longer feeling compelled to change a system that "costs too much":

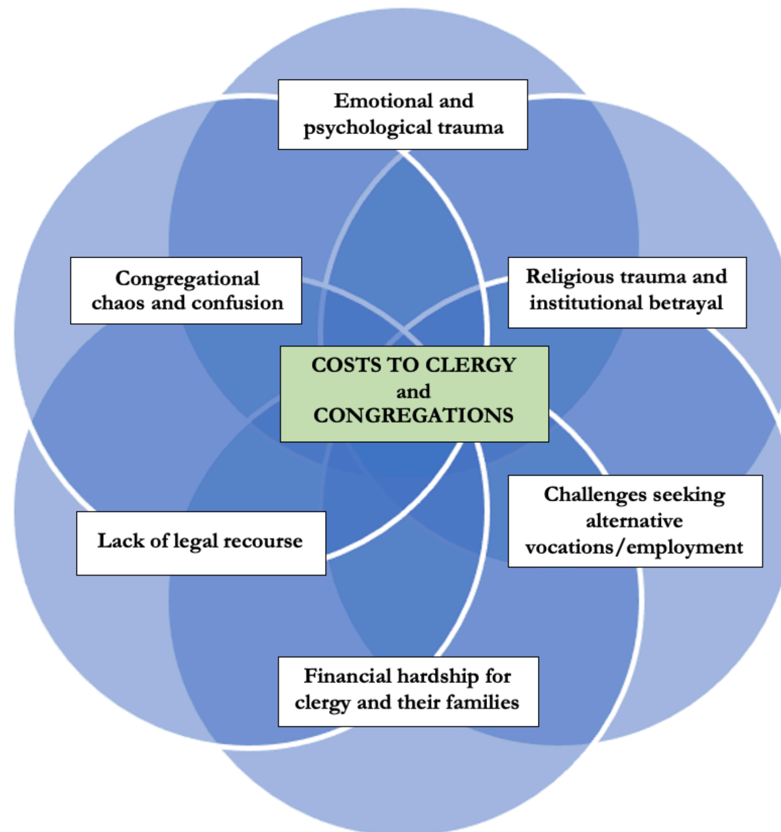
> In my recovery I have been trying to let myself off the hook for changing the system from within, knowing that it just costs too much. The system did not have enough to support me in doing that difficult work of changing the system from within. If I had just been compensated fairly, that may have made a difference. That would have gone a long way in my ability to stay and fight some of those fights. But without that floor and without enough allies on these fronts, it just costs too much.

In some ways, presenting the research findings and data interpretation from this study serves as a form of collective reckoning, as this is the first grounded theory study to examine the dehumanizing and abusive experiences of feminized servanthood and gendered scapegoating of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women. Perhaps this is a first step in the process of institutional reckoning, yet with an awareness that it is up to each of the individual women who encountered these dynamics to determine her level of involvement in exposing these realities, and the extent to which it feels safe and/or meaningful within her process of recovery.

Whether or not the women in this study and others who have encountered similar dynamics choose to engage in any formal kind of institutional reckoning, it is important to take account of the costs, primarily those experienced by the clergy women themselves, but also the remaining individuals in their ministry contexts. These costs, exhibited through the conceptual category of *reconstituting self*, included (1) emotional and psychological trauma; (2) religious trauma and institutional betrayal; (3) challenges seeking alternative employment; (4) financial hardship for clergy women and their families; (5) lack of legal recourse; and (6) congregational chaos and confusion. These costs are illustrated in Figure 5.8 and discussed in further detail below.

Figure 5.8

The Costs of Feminized Servanthood and Gendered Scapegoating for Clergy and Congregations



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Emotional and Psychological Trauma: As demonstrated in this study, the dehumanizing and abusive experiences of feminized servanthood and gendered scapegoating were and continue to be detrimental to the emotional well-being of the women clergy, who were by all accounts extremely competent, compassionate, and ethical leaders, and were generally well-respected in their parish contexts and surrounding local communities. The extreme rejection of their pastoral identity on the part of a handful of individuals led many of the women to experience debilitating anxiety and depression while still in their ministry contexts, with continued emotional trauma in the immediate aftermath. Ongoing psychological damage

includes questions of self-worth, doubt in one's spiritual calling, and deep questioning of one's overall faith journey. Institutional gaslighting, silencing, and shaming of young women clergy, at both congregational and denominational levels, also led to the women's inability to trust larger denominational systems. These social and institutional dynamics have left the majority of the clergy research participants no longer interested in continuing a pastoral vocation and ultimately leaving active ministry.

Religious Trauma and Institutional Betrayal: For those who were able to recover emotionally, financially, and professionally from clergy scapegoating, the religious trauma experienced by the women continues to involve a much more difficult path of recovery. The majority of the research participants noted the inability to walk into a church without feeling emotionally triggered. As a result, most of the research participants avoid attending church or affiliating with any faith-based community, which is extremely painful for those with clergy spouses and/or children who have developed a personal connection to church life. For those clergy with children, there is a constant negotiation of how to present the realities of toxic church culture without diminishing their children's development of faith and spirituality.

Challenges Seeking Alternative Vocations or Employment: For the women who ultimately decided to leave ordained ministry, financial necessity coupled with a desire to recuperate their professional identity caused them to seek alternative employment. Many of the women have perused vocations in non-religious fields such as teaching, counseling, social work, and human services, while others have made a more direct departure from caregiving professions and have embarked on new careers including environmental advocacy, real estate, and entrepreneurial ventures. However, as the women found, having been in congregational ministry for several years, in addition to typically three years of seminary education, it has been difficult

for the women to pivot professionally, regardless of what alternative career trajectory they take. Despite the diverse skillset, managerial acumen, and highly developed emotional intelligence required of pastoral leaders, former clergy are often viewed with a great deal of skepticism among non-religious employers, requiring former clergy to re-define themselves professionally, often requiring additional degrees or certification.

Financial Hardship for Clergy and Their Families: For those women who experienced chronic psychological abuse and those who were targets of the scapegoating mechanism within their congregations, the clergy women continually assessed the level of instability within their ministerial contexts and sought denominational support. While some were more financially able to leave their positions on their own terms, each of the women faced difficult financial considerations. Some felt forced to "voluntarily" resign, quietly leave, and in some cases sign or verbally agree to non-disclosure agreements, having been told it would protect their future employability as a clergy. Such forced resignations made it difficult for the women to quickly transition into alternative work or ministerial settings in order to make-up for lost income. Due to the inability for clergy to secure a more robust investigations of misconduct, executive derailment, and scapegoating dynamics, the clergy women were often denied adequate severance, which Protestant denominations regularly offer in instances of irreconcilable differences or extreme hardship. In addition, women clergy serving in senior-level pastoral positions were often the primary breadwinners for their families, due to the strong benefit packages offered by mainline Protestant denominations. Clergy who resided in a manse or parsonage immediately lost their housing, which further intensified their financial vulnerability. These financial considerations delayed many of the clergy women from leaving highly volatile

congregational settings in the first place, causing them to endure prolonged psychological abuse and institutional gaslighting as they assessed their precarious circumstances.

Lack of Legal Recourse: Due to the separation of church and state, ecclesial leaders, including Protestant clergy, are not afforded protection by anti-discrimination laws including England's Equality Act of 2021 (Greene & Robbins, 2015, p. 406) and the United States' Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This "ministerial exemption" (The Pew Forum, 2011) is based on the ecclesial status of ordained clergy, who are generally considered outside of the bounds of secular legal protection. This leaves women clergy with little to no legal recourse against such abuses as sexual misconduct, harassment, unsafe work environments, and breaches of contract, thereby placing clergy women in a vulnerable and, in some cases, dangerous leadership space. Such areas of conflict are left to be addressed by internal judicatory processes led by denominational leaders, who are often ill-equipped to support or actively reject the claims brought forth by clergy women (Greene & Robbins, 2015, p. 406). While separation of church and state is deeply valued within contemporary society, the inability of clergy to pursue legal counsel or recourse when faced with unsafe work conditions, gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and professional defamation, is an extreme professional hazard to working as an ordained clergy (The Pew Forum, 2011).

Congregational Chaos and Confusion: While the focus of this research was the experience of women clergy themselves, the dehumanizing and abusive treatment of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women also has a negative impact on the entire congregational system. In the wake of hostile scapegoating, forced, or expedited resignations, and the resulting expulsion of a pastoral leader, there is a lack of closure and open communication, which leads to dysphoria and silencing within the congregational social system with many innocently asking,

"Why did she leave?" As outlined in Girard's (1986) mimetic theory, the scapegoating process operates as a seemingly cathartic, cleansing act that removes perceived dangerous elements and results in a false sense of calm, unity, and cultural homogeneity. This apparent and temporary peace is a deceptive veil that further silences the realities of dehumanizing treatment, inhibits genuine dialogue, and prevents behavioral and cultural change. Without the ability to critically reflect on these dynamics, congregations are both unable and at times unwilling to address unhealthy relational patterns that will inevitably affect future pastoral leaders, particularly other clergy women.

Problematizing "Resiliency"

My original research question centered on the lived experiences of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women who have left active ministry due to violations of their interpersonal boundaries and threats to their physical and/or psychological safety. While this area of inquiry was the main focus of the interviews, each conversation eventually evolved into reflections on how each of the women navigated their personal and professional lives and reclaimed their sense of self after leaving their ministry contexts. As I constructed the explanatory matrix, the primary dimension of *reconstituting self* surfaced as a possible overarching theme, and at one point made it into the working title of this dissertation. However, after deep reflection, discussion with colleagues engaged in trauma-informed research, and revisiting these themes in each of the interviews, it was clear that the idea of recovery and reclaiming of one's personhood should be seen not as a final word of hope and redemption, but as a path painstaking carved out of necessity and survival. The complex relationship that the women had with notions of resilience is expressed by Jenny in the following way:

> After feeling guilty about using the word "abuse," I feel liberated to use it. If what I experienced was abuse then it's easier to see that how I felt and my struggles to cope

> were not my fault. It wasn't a lack of resilience or strength. It was the reality of working in a toxic environment. You never get used to breathing poison—you have to remove yourself from it in order to feel better. It changes my feelings from cowering in shame, to standing tall and feeling proud of what I was able to accomplish in the midst of that abuse and toxicity. It also makes me feel angry because I would have loved to have my whole career in the church, and now I have to reinvent myself. There's liberation in that, but also sadness and anger that it's even necessary.

Many of the women expressed wanting to no longer perpetuate victim mentality, yet at the same time needing to acknowledge the intense mistreatment to which they were subjected. In honoring this tension, I have intentionally highlighted the women's agency and decision-making throughout their experiences in ministry, not just in their decisions to leave, as noted in Theoretical Proposition II. Cora powerfully described this interplay between concrete elements of victimization and reclaiming a sense of agency and choice:

> When I was thinking about this interview, I was very clear that I didn't want to be seen as a victim. What I've focused on is that in every moment of this process, I was the one that made the choice to step away. I was the one that made the choice to stop. I can't do this. Nobody made me do anything. All along, it was me saying, I know there's a better choice than this. And so, with that choice, I also see the insecurity of, "I did this to myself, for a period of time." They didn't kick me out. I made the choice to go. I made the choice to stay away. I could call up the denomination today and say I want an appointment next month and I'm sure they would plug me back in. And so, over those years I had to learn to trust myself in a way that I had never trusted myself before. And once that process began, I could own my decision without blaming myself for the aftermath.

As expressed by Jenny and Cora, none of the women contextualized the dehumanizing and abusive experiences related to feminized servanthood as simply a character-building chapter in a broader path of self-discovery (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Instead, each of the women recognized and deeply felt the injustice of their experiences, which I echo as both a feminist researcher and former clergy with personal awareness of the dehumanizing and dysfunctionality of Protestant church culture. Therefore, I am cautious to present any discussion of healing, recovery, and resilience in a way that minimizes or deflects the lived experiences of dehumanization and psychological abuse. In the final stages of this research, as I drew together the composite

narratives and theoretical propositions, I sought to avoid presenting an overly hopeful or redemptive message of recovery. Roberts (2022) speaks to this tension by problematizing the notion of "grit" for women leaders seeking school superintendency:

> There is an inherent problem with the notion of grit, as it places the onus on the woman to persevere despite challenges that are out of their zone of influence. . . . Only focusing on the impact of grit, and not the structures and power that result in the need for grit as it applies to the superintendent search process, inappropriately clears the power structure from responsibility toward increasing equity in the position. (p. 187)

In each of the interviews, the women similarly interrogated simplistic understandings of resilience. This aligns with my own feminist epistemology, which seeks to center women's experiences and promote emancipatory research that addresses oppressive patriarchal social systems. At the same time, I acknowledge the women's leadership strengths, decision-making capacity, and personal self-awareness that developed throughout their experiences in and beyond ordained ministry.

Reclaiming Personal and Leadership Strengths

A common thread that I found as each of the women shared their own recovery process and reclaiming of self, was acknowledgment of their own personal and leadership strengths, which were the very same qualities that were rejected by certain individuals and collective narratives within their ministry contexts. It became clear that the same traits that made the women effective leaders and skilled communicators who are grounded in a deep sense of self, were the very things that were most threatening and destabilizing for certain individuals, as discussed in Theoretical Propositions II, III, and IV. The women's recovery process drew out additional elements of personal strength, self-awareness, and embodied knowing, which reinforces the importance of understanding resilience through the lens of an "embodied

psychosocial subject" (Aranda et al., 2012, p. 548) as opposed to one-dimensional or linear notions of recovery that assume a certain endpoint.

The process of reclaiming one's personal and leadership strengths came in many forms, with the women focusing on a combination of their identities as a woman and a leader. Allegra described the process of reconstituting self as deeply connected to her identity as a woman:

> Embodying who I actually am instead of who I thought I had to be to fill a role. I'm embracing my inner goddess. I'm like a beautiful glass of wine that's finally reaching its bloom, like how grapes take time before they can reach that. I feel more grounded in who I am and not apologizing for that. This is who I am.

For Sandra, the process of reclaiming self means being able to apply her leadership skills in new professional spaces:

> I'm one of those people who can both see the big picture and the long-term goals while also seeing all the little steps that need to happen to get there. And so that makes me both good at visioning and also practical in the everyday life of ministry. Those are skills that I feel like I was very rarely able to employ in my previous churches. I've started doing some interim work where it's important to be able to see the big picture and the little steps and so I'm excited to finally gets to use those skills.

Deborah understood the process of reconstituting self in the ability to use her voice freely:

> In my post-ministry writing I get really excited when I use profanity or say things that I would never preach in a pulpit because I know a person in the congregation will think that's too far or will argue with me after the sermon. There's a freedom of thought and it's not just freedom of expression. I'm not obligated to stay within anybody else's boundaries anymore.

The women's experiences of recovery expressed an ongoing and non-linear dynamic, which challenges established narratives of resilience as 'found' and 'made' in which individual agency and subjectivity are insufficiently recognized. Instead, this study revealed a third path of resilience that is 'unfinished' and prioritizes the individual's "subjectivity, identity, and body" throughout the recovery process (Aranda et al., 2012, p. 548). In addition, the women's experiences reflected the embodied nature of trauma recovery (Van der Kolk, 2014). As

Menakem (2017) states, “Contrary to what many people believe, trauma is not primarily an emotional response. Trauma always happens in the body. . . a wordless story our body tells itself about what is safe and what is a threat” (pp. 7, 9). The importance of embodied practices of trauma recovery were reflected in several of the women’s use of various therapeutic and pyscho-somatic modalities such as EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing), tapping, and long-distance running. which helped the women metabolize their experiences of psychological abuse and trauma. Based on the scope of this study, further research is needed to address the cross-section of trauma-informed resilience and embodied approaches to recovery for women leaders who have experienced institutional betrayal, dehumanizing treatment and psychological abuse with their professional contexts, executive derailment and/or systemic scapegoating.

For those women who experienced gendered scapegoating, as illustrated by composite Narrative A, there were specific personal and leadership strengths reflected by the women. These qualities were particularly evident in those women who exhibited higher levels of agency and self-differentiation and were therefore more likely to be scapegoated by weak authority figures and those with a human identity need for control and dominance. Similar to the oversimplifications of resilience noted above, it is important to not interpret the scapegoating mechanism as a way to reveal or hone certain leadership and character traits. Instead, this discussion is meant to honor the important qualities that scapegoats often exhibit, while at the same time problematizing the scapegoat mechanism itself. Such personal and leadership strengths proved to be threatening to the scapegoaters, and reinforced the value of these qualities in the women who participated in this study. Figure 5.9 outlines the specific strengths observed in the women who experienced gendered scapegoating: (1) honesty, integrity, and truth-telling;

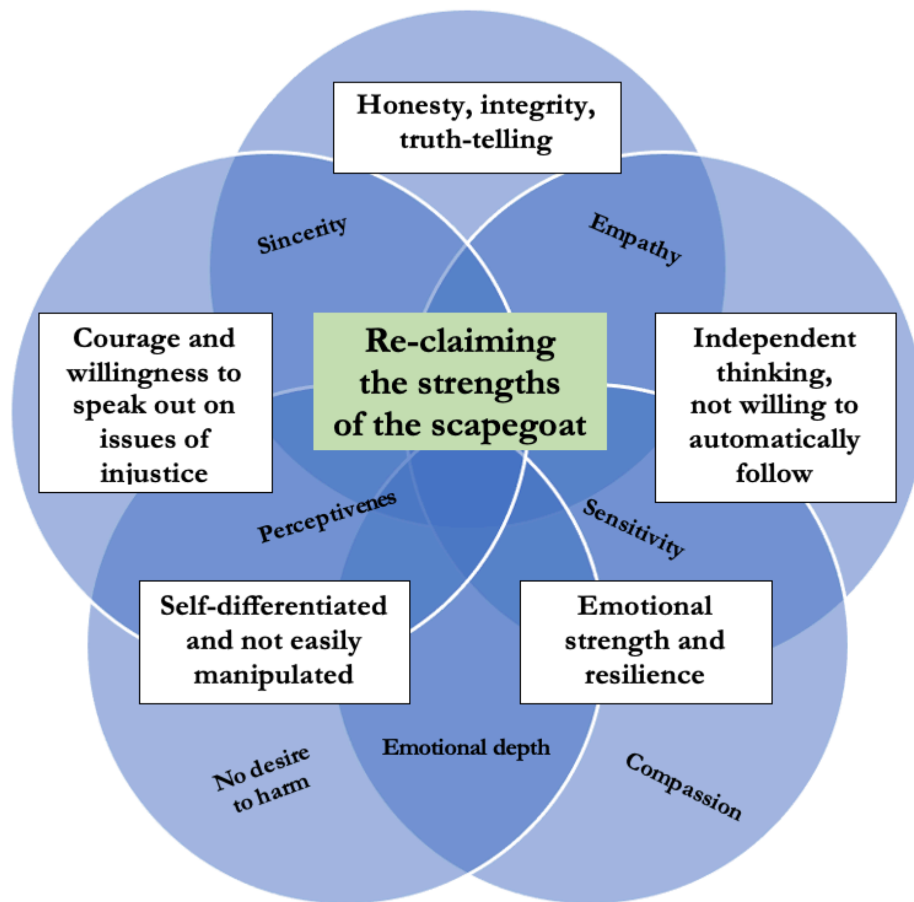
(2) independent thinking and unwillingness to automatically follow; (3) courage and willingness to speak out on issues of injustice; (4) emotional strength and resilience; and (5) self-differentiated and not easily manipulated. While the women represented in composite Narrative B also exhibited many of these qualities, they were more pronounced for those women represented in Narrative A, and ultimately influenced others' scapegoating behaviors.

In addition to these personal and leadership traits were aspects of self that made the women less able to confront scapegoating behaviors and/or seek recourse. As pastoral leaders, both those in more senior level positions and those in associate pastor roles, the women generally exhibited such traits as sincerity, empathy, perceptiveness, sensitivity, emotional depth, compassion, and lack of motivation to hurt or harm. These qualities are often inherent to the role of pastor and other caregiving, service-oriented professions. However, the women in this study experienced heightened levels of cruelty, criticism, and judgement on the part of other clergy and congregants, which ultimately took advantage of these more humanistic traits. Jenny recalled a conversation she had with a friend near the end of her ministry that enabled her to see these dynamics more clearly:

> I was talking to a friend about my frustrations with the church and she said, "Jenny, they're taking advantage of you. This is why you're so upset." I had a hard time even taking that in because I just assumed that we're all in this together to serve. It never occurred to me that people would want to control the narrative in that way. I had always heard of that but I just didn't think that the people I would be working with would be that way. It was the first time that it really occurred to me that they were taking advantage of me.

Figure 5.9

Reclaiming Leadership Strengths of the Scapegoat



Many of the clergy women experienced the two-sided coin of identifying and at times confronting manipulative and abusive personalities within their ministry contexts, yet at the same time exhibiting highly empathic traits of compassion and understanding. Ultimately, the women became hyper-aware of the interpersonal dynamics in their midst, and over time were less willing to excuse or absorb the destructive behaviors. Allegra described no longer needing to fix a broken system, noting:

> I'm not in charge of everybody's feelings. Not everybody is gonna like me. It is not my responsibility to save the church. We all were handed a shitty card anyways because this

> stuff was already breaking apart. And it's not my role to fix what other people have already broken.

Similarly, Cindy felt that:

> My attitude started to shift at that point. My willingness to deal with people's crap and people projecting all over me was like, I'm done with that. I have a life of my own. And that just kind of grew as I went through things.

As the women continue to process their feelings of betrayal, disappointment, and disenchantment (Turner, 2015) of entering a vocation that ultimately stripped them of their humanity, the women have observed important shifts in their own self-understanding as they continue to reconstitute self and reclaim their personal and leadership strengths. This more nuanced, non-linear, ongoing, and embodied understanding of trauma recovery acknowledges the complex nature of resilience, as it addresses the actual harm experienced, interrogates existing structures of oppression, and acknowledges individual agency and subjectivity.

Scope of this Study

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of Gen-X/Millennial Protestant clergy women who have left active ministry due to violations of their interpersonal boundaries and threats to their physical and/or psychological safety. I intentionally sought a diverse participant pool, which yielded a wide range of demographics including denominational affiliation, geographic region, prior professional experience, and various types of pastoral leadership positions. However, despite intentional and focused recruitment efforts, there was less diversity with regard to race and sexual orientation. Two participants are Black clergy women and five participants identify as LGBTQ+, with the remaining thirteen women identifying as White, cis-gender, and heterosexual. As outlined in Chapter II, this overrepresentation is highly reflective of the White, heteronormativity of American mainline Protestantism, as well as my own positionality as a White researcher with access to predominantly White denominational

clergy networks. Despite this limitation, this study did address important aspects of intersectionality while at the same time inviting further research that includes a more diverse participant pool in terms of race, sexual orientation, and nonbinary gender identities.

The intent of this research was to focus exclusively on the lived experience of clergy women, which included significant sharing around how the clergy women felt others perceived their individual identities and leadership. Based on the scope of this study, I did not have the ability to capture the self-understandings and perspectives of those most resistant to the women clergy. As noted in Theoretical Proposition III, the women experienced others' negative perceptions of them as a "dissident daughter" or "emasculating disruptor." Through their conversations and interactions with others, the women observed what they felt were individuals' distrust, frustration, and dissatisfaction with their leadership and identity, which did not reflect how the clergy women perceived themselves. Despite these recurring social dynamics, the conclusions drawn around the social processes of the *mother-daughter wound* and *disrupting masculinity* are incomplete, due to the inability of this study to access others' interior thought processes regarding the women's leadership and identity. Future research in this area would need to include first-person accounts of others within the ministry context in order to capture the conscious and subconscious elements related to gender-identity narratives that informed the negative perceptions certain individuals may have had of the clergy women.

Throughout this study I sought to uphold several elements of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After approaching saturation of data near the fifteenth interview (Charmaz, 2003), I continued with five additional interviews, resulting in a total of 20 women who participated in this study. The credibility of this study was reflected through robust data collection and the

constant comparative process, yielding 60 pages of memos and 280 pages of transcripts, which produced 2,019 codes that were applied to 2,086 excerpts of interview content. Throughout this process, I maintained a high level of reflexivity in order to bracket my own assumptions and personal theories (Rose, 1985), thereby prioritizing the participants' own meaning-making processes. The centering of the women's voices and knowledge was further reinforced by my feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1987), which embraces women's experiences as a source of deep wisdom and knowledge production. In addition, this research was informed by feminist empiricism, which supports research design that promotes "emancipatory transformation" (Kushner & Marrow, 2003, p. 37). This study also promoted rigorous qualitative research that seeks to shed light on the human experience rather than offer generalizable assertations from the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result, the scope of this study sought to explore the experiences Gen-X/Millennial clergy women who have left active ministry due to violations of the interpersonal boundaries and threats to their physical and/or psychological safety, which resulted in the five theoretical propositions outlined above.

Implications for Future Research

This study represents the first feminist constructivist grounded theory study on Gen-X/Millennial clergy women's decisions to leave active ministry due to concerns over their interpersonal boundaries and psychological safety. The findings of this study are also groundbreaking, as they inform new and emergent theory surrounding the dehumanizing and abusive realities experienced by Gen-X/Millennial clergy women within Protestant church culture. The findings and theoretical propositions drawn from this study have implications for future research both within religious and faith-based contexts, as well as non-religious,

caregiving professions, and corporate sectors with histories of male-centered leadership and ingrained expectations of feminized servanthood.

This study also sheds light on the shadow side of servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 2002) and the ways in which feminized notions of servanthood harm women leaders. While these dynamics are magnified within religious contexts with theologically embedded narratives of self-sacrifice, they are also prevalent in non-religious, caregiving sectors such as healthcare and education, as well as corporate sectors with highly gendered roles and expectations. There is an opportunity for constructivist qualitative study designs that apply a more feminist critical lens, in order to address the ways in which expectations of feminized servanthood lead to compassion fatigue and emotional burnout (Myers, 2020), as well as systemic scapegoating and executive derailment (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Rather than promote research that simply encourages increased self-care practices and professional boundaries that promote work-life balance, future research is needed to problematize why younger self-differentiated women leaders who exhibit such practices experience rejection and resentment within their professional settings.

This study also points to the need for longitudinal qualitative research that explores the long-term process of recovery and reconstituting of self for women leaders who have experienced institutional betrayal. Such research could explore the developments in personal, spiritual, and professional identity over a period of five to ten years, for clergy women who have left active ministry due to dehumanizing and abusive practices within their ministry contexts. Within non-religious sectors, longitudinal research could explore the ongoing recovery period for women leaders who have experienced executive derailment and gendered scapegoating and the resulting non-linear process of emotional, psychological, and vocational recovery. The findings from such research would be helpful in presenting the long-term costs of such social dynamics

for both women leaders themselves and the institutions that fail to embrace their leadership. In addition, such research creates further opportunities for shifting work-based culture and gender bias to more readily embrace women's leadership strengths.

It would also be worthwhile to explore the mother-daughter wound in other sectors where conflict over gender-identity narratives is heightened between Gen-X/Millennial women managers and certain older women employees. While research on toxic masculinity has gained increased attention, there continues to be silencing and shame surrounding intergenerational conflict between women both in private familial settings and professional spaces (Hasseldine, 2017). The denial and minimization of these dynamics both within leadership practice and scholarship is unhelpful and damaging. Rather than presenting such research in an accusatory manner that singles out older women as perpetuating harmful gender narratives of female servitude, there is an opportunity for healing and reconciliation between different generations of women when these dynamics are made transparent through rigorous qualitative research.

Future research is also needed to explore the lived experiences of individuals who resist self-differentiated women leaders and what social processes contribute to these assessments. As noted in the previous discussions on embodied leadership and perception, it is highly likely that others' negative perceptions of self-differentiated women leaders are grounded in the inter-subjective space of "pre-reflective, bodily existence" (Ladkin, 2012, p. (3) and therefore remain at a subconscious level. Nonetheless, it would be helpful to hear the voices and perspectives of others within Protestant church culture and non-religious professional sectors, particularly those who are critically aware of the dynamics addressed in this study but who themselves are more emotionally removed. In addition, future research is needed to explore a more diverse participant pool, particularly with regard to race, gender identity, and sexual

orientation, as well as representing congregations that are more racially diverse within or beyond mainline Protestant denominations.

Finally, there is significant crossover between the fields of feminist critical mimetic theory, gender, and leadership, which warrants rigorous qualitative research on the phenomenon of scapegoating of women leaders. My exploration of the interrelated dynamics of mimetic scapegoating and gender bias in leadership as it relates to Protestant clergy women boundaries and psychological safety, provides important groundwork that can be applied to other non-religious leadership contexts with high boundary permeability and conflicting gender identity narratives. Such future research would enrich already existing scholarship on gender and race-critical analyses of leadership, including engrained gender bias (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016), executive derailment, and the "glass cliff" phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

Implications for Leadership Practice

Based on the feedback that I received from the research participants, this research was extremely edifying and validating for each of the clergy women as it enabled them to further recover their sense of voice and agency following systemic efforts to silence their experiences of scapegoating, executive derailment, and professional defamation. The interviews conducted for this study are just a fraction of the growing number of Gen-X/Millennial women clergy who have experienced or are currently experiencing this kind of professional and religious trauma. Not only was this research vitally important to those involved in the study, the overall dissertation has transformative potential for its readers, particularly those whose experiences reflect that of the research participants and those who may have the capacity to advocate for institutional change. As a result, there are important implications for leadership practice and institutional reform within mainline Protestantism. Beyond the specific context of Protestant

church culture, there are also important implications for change with regard to generation-critical leadership and intentional efforts to retain Gen-X/Millennial women leaders across all sectors. These opportunities for leadership and social change are outlined in more detail below.

Denominational Reform

Based on the findings of this study, it is my hope that efforts will be made to (1) professionalize and adequately train church and denominational human resource entities to fully recognize the dynamics of feminized servanthood and gendered scapegoating; (2) expand seminary curriculum to address forms of intergenerational and gender-based conflict that are pervasive within Protestant church culture; (3) promote efforts toward clergy unionization in light of church-state separation and the lack of legal recourse for clergy who experience workplace harassment and discrimination; (4) increase denominational advocacy in cases where weak regional church governance re-victimizes clergy women who are seeking support; (5) standardize severance negotiation practices including the elimination of non-disclosure agreements; (6) require ongoing boundary training for congregations that is comparable to that which is required of ordained clergy; and (7) build congregational awareness and the need for cultural change with regard to ingrained gender-identity narratives and their harmful impact on the psychological safety and interpersonal boundaries of younger clergy women.

Generation-Critical Leadership

Gender and leadership scholars have entered a unique moment in history where multiple generations are working side-by-side in the same professional environments, but are facing heightened asymmetry between leadership approaches. The next 10 to 15 years have significant implications as Baby Boomer and Gen-X/Millennial leaders negotiate different gender-identity narratives, understandings of leadership, approaches to conflict resolution, and overall world

views. As younger leaders enter managerial positions that oversee older employees, these intersecting approaches and perspectives offer important opportunities for cross-pollination of ideas and transitions in organizational leadership. However, intergenerational dynamics also have the potential to create increased system anxiety, which can have particularly negative effects on younger minoritized leaders who may be the first person of their particularly identity to enter a certain leadership position.

Scholarship on generational theory has shifted considerably in the past two decades due to the lack of empirical evidence for concrete differences between generations in terms of beliefs, values, and practice. However, there has also been discussion that research scope and study design have not adequately addressed the more tacit dynamics surrounding intergenerational conflict in the workplace (National Academies, 2020, p. 70). There continues to be tension between the lack of concrete empirical evidence on generational differences, yet the very present and, at times, conflictual relational dynamics between different aged cohorts of individuals in various professional settings (Appelbaum et al., 2022). Therefore, while generational typologies may not always be convincing determinants of social conflict, this study revealed concrete evidence of generational conflict, particularly with regard to conflicting gender narratives, the mother-daughter wound, and rigid narratives of masculinity.

The findings from this study have important implications for leadership practice, as this study highlights the ways in which different gender narratives between generations can negatively affect Gen-X/Millennial women leaders. This dynamic may be particularly evident when small cohorts of older men and women coalesce to delegitimize younger women managers, based on engrained gender narratives and internalized sexism of older generations. Such awareness is critically important for both Gen-X/Millennial women leaders themselves, as they

respond to shifts in public perception around them, as well as the observers of these dynamics who may serve an important role in advocacy and accountability within their professional contexts. In the case of the gendered scapegoating of Gen-X/Millennial clergy women, if more individuals had been critically aware of these dynamics and willing to hold others accountable, the women in this study may have experienced extremely different outcomes. Just as race-critical leadership practices have helped to identify the tacit behaviors of systemic micro-aggression (Walker, 2019), gender-critical and generation-critical leadership has the potential to more adequately address the dehumanizing behaviors against younger women leaders.

Retaining Gen-X/Millennial Women Leaders

As illustrated above by Figures 5.4 and 5.9, Gen-X/Millennial women leaders exhibit important leadership strengths and abilities that are needed across all professional sectors. While the leadership skills and approaches of Gen-X/Millennial women leaders presented in this study are not exhaustive, the participants in this study exhibited decentralizing leadership approaches, collaborative decision-making, and inclusive leadership practices. In addition, the women in this study, particularly those who experienced gendered scapegoating, exhibited personal strengths including systems-level problem-solving, transparency and mutual accountability, and ethical and justice-oriented leadership. The combination of these and other related leadership skills represent an important paradigm shift that promotes de-colonizing and humanizing approaches to leadership. This observation is not intended to generalize that all Gen-X/Millennial women exhibit human-centered leadership qualities that should be promoted or emulated. However, for those institutions that value or could potentially benefit from these leadership approaches, there is a significant cost to human development and community sustainability when such leaders are rejected and/or devalued. The extreme resistance that certain Gen-X/Millennial women leaders

currently face across a variety of sectors points to the need for intentional policies and practices that support the retention of Gen-X/Millennial women leaders. In addition, there is a need for more robust accountability structures for those who maintain expectations of feminized servanthood or those who actively seek to remove more self-differentiated women leaders through gendered scapegoating and other bullying or targeting behaviors. These dynamics effectively push high-functioning, competent women leaders out of their respective leadership positions and professions, resulting in significant costs for both the women leaders and the institutions that they leave.

Researcher Reflections and Conclusion

Hesitant Hope

Engaging in this research was both harrowing and healing. I knew at the onset that I would encounter experiences that reflected some of my own journey in and beyond ordained ministry. However, I felt stunned and deeply saddened by the extent to which the abusive conditions severely compromised the women's physical and emotional well-being. I did not enter this research looking for hope, as I deeply question attempts to extract redemptive messages out of abusive and dehumanizing conditions. The findings of this study are not meant to illustrate the age-old notion of "iron sharpening iron," which ultimately reinforces the kind of "sacrificial embrace" (Greene & Robins, 2015) that worked to minimize the women's traumatic experiences. There was genuine pain, unjust treatment, unnecessary harm, and undeniable abuse. Having worked with survivors of domestic violence, I have heard women say that the only hope is that they "got out." This seems to capture the hesitant hope that exists in this research, while at the same time acknowledging the damaging impact of the women's experiences. The remaining

questions of hope are for each of the women to determine themselves, as they continue their paths of recovery, self-actualization, and healing.

Alongside my hesitation to claim hope amid the realities of the women's experiences, both myself and the women who participated in this study shared a deep sense of gratitude. Several of the women noted during their interview or our subsequence email correspondence that they had never told their full story to anyone, or at least to someone who they felt truly believed them. Others shared that preparing for the interview helped them to embrace more fully their decisions to leave, and to further release feelings of doubt and shame. Just as I had observed and felt elements of hope even if hesitantly throughout this research process, I also saw glimpses of healing, particularly within the community of survivors that coalesced around this research. The gratitude felt by the women is mirrored by my own gratitude for the women's openness and honesty, and their willingness to trust me with their experiences. The advocacy community that has built up around this research is an incredibly positive outcome, thanks to the women who courageously shared their experiences. As this research is disseminated beyond the individuals who participated in this study, I am mindful of those who may question, resist, or reject these research findings, in an effort to protect the institutions described in this study. Nevertheless, I feel assured and grounded by the possibility for healing that this research may provide others, for the solidarity it may offer for those who are currently experiencing pain from these experiences, and for the guidance it may give those in the midst of similar forms of relational and institutional conflict.

Believing Women

As I navigated this grounded theory study, I sought to remain emotionally neutral in order to prioritize the women's meaning-making processes. In an effort to maintain the role of

researcher, I was careful to not overly divulge my feelings of anger and frustration at what the women experienced, or express unfiltered compassion and empathy even when those emotions arose during each interview. In Chapters IV and V, I also explicitly stated the tension between the women's concrete descriptions of others' behavior and mistreatment, and the inability to know the internal motivations and perceptions behind others' behavior. In acknowledging this study's inability to ascertain the inner-thought processes that guided others' outward behavior toward the clergy women, I also firmly believe in the validity of what the women shared. Moreover, I feel extremely disturbed by the undeniable physical and psychological harm that the women experienced and the lack of advocacy that they found within their ministry contexts and denominations. I have restated this tension throughout the findings and conclusions of this study, and at the same time, I strongly and unequivocally maintain the legitimacy and truth of the women's experiences.

As I conducted the interviews, holding back my own emotions in order to promote rigorous qualitative research, I often felt ingenuine and overly stoic. My common response of "What did that feel like?" or "Could you tell me more about that?" felt stilted and wooden, while at the same time promoting a certain spaciousness in which the women could more openly share. I prepared the women for this intentional style of questioning in the preamble to each interview, however I often felt uncomfortable with the formality and one-sidedness of the interview, despite it being an important quality and ethical safeguard of grounded theory research. Research interviews are not meant to be a reciprocal conversation, yet at the same time, each interview was a human interaction that I initiated, which carried a moral responsibility of creating no harm. With that ethos in mind, I felt it was important to prepare for each interview with a simple statement that set the tone for the work being done. Prior to each interview, I engaged in a ritual

practice of writing the woman's real name on a piece of paper and the words "I believe you." This was an important way of meeting the women's courage in sharing with my unequivocal acceptance of the truth of her experience. Following several of the interviews, the women expressed how important it felt to share their experiences with someone who they felt genuinely believed them, particularly for those who had never felt their experiences were heard.

Believing women isn't just situational or limited to the instances in which a woman is sharing aspects of her life and one has the choice either to accept or reject those words. Instead, believing women is an epistemological stance and philosophical orientation that influenced the ways that I conducted this study and reflected on the data that was gathered. What was especially helpful in my case was the fact that I had experienced some of these dehumanizing dynamics in my own ministry journey, an insider status that was discussed earlier in my positionality statement. The importance of believing women was reinforced while I concluded my data analysis and was summarizing the findings of this study, which coincided with the breaking news that the prior conviction of a prominent sex offender had been overturned, based on the court's decision that too many witnesses had been allowed to testify (Nawaz & Dubnow, 2024). The timing of this verdict, which also occurred during Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month, reinforced for me the lifesaving capacity of believing women, which was an underlying premise of this entire study.

My intentional practice of believing women is a radical choice, which has been further reinforced by the ongoing efforts whether privately, publicly, politically, or legally, to discount, discredit, and deny the lived experiences of women. The concept of believing women in the context of this research felt especially important considering the systemic efforts to silence, gaslight, and minimize the reality of women's experiences in both religious and non-religious

contexts. Prioritizing women's experiences in this research also provides voice, space, and validity for other women who have encountered similar mistreatment. When women feel they are believed by individuals and society at large, they are more likely to report experiences of abuse, trauma, and dehumanization (Valenti & Friedman, 2020). My hope is that this research will compel more individuals and institutions to listen to women, to deeply question the existing narratives that seek to silence, reject, or deny the truth of our lived experiences, and to create opportunities for concrete cultural and behavioral change.

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APPENDIX A: PERMISSION FROM THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

October 12, 2023

Presbyterian Mission Agency
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY

To the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the PC(U.S.A.):

I am completing a doctoral dissertation at Antioch University entitled "Personal Boundaries and Psychological Safety of Protestant Female Clergy and Decisions to Leave Active Ministry." I would like your permission to reprint in my dissertation the following diagram:

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Organizational Structure.* Retrieved from https://www.presbyterianmission.org/who-we-are/pcusa-and-pma-organizational-charts/

The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my dissertation, including non-exclusive world rights in all languages, and to the prospective publication of my dissertation by ProQuest through its ProQuest® Dissertation Publishing business. ProQuest may produce and sell copies of my dissertation on demand and may make my dissertation available for free internet download at my request.

These rights will in no way restrict republication of the material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you. Your signing of this letter will also confirm that you own [or your company owns] the copyright to the above-described material.

If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated below

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Rev. Lynn M. Horan
PhD Candidate
Antioch University
Graduate School of Leadership and Change

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE
USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

By: Michael Kirk

Title: VP General Counsel
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Date: 10/20/23

APPENDIX B: CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS FACEBOOK POST

CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

My name is Lynn Horan and I am a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) clergy completing my PhD in Leadership and Change. My dissertation includes a study of Gen X and Millennial women clergy who have left a pastoral call or active ministry due to violations of their personal/professional boundaries and/or threats to their psychological safety.

If you're interested in participating in this research, below are further details and participant criteria:

- I will conduct a 60-75 minute unstructured one-on-one ZOOM interview with each participant, with possible follow-up email contact for clarification of interview content. Interviews to begin in January 2024.
- You have left a pastoral position or active ministry altogether due to issues of boundaries and psychological safety.
- You have been out of your call situation for at least 6 months and feel comfortable sharing your experiences in ministry.
- You have at least one mental health professional in your life that you can connect with at any point during this research.
- You are willing to have excerpts from your testimony published, with removal of your name and any identifying factors.

If you are interested, please DM me with your email address. Interested participants will then be emailed an informed consent form with more details prior to entering the study.

APPENDIX C: CALL FOR CLERGY WOMEN OF COLOR PARTICIPANTS LINKEDIN AND FACEBOOK POST

SEEKING RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS who are CLERGY WOMEN OF COLOR

I'm completing my PhD dissertation on boundaries and psychological safety of Millennial/Gen-X clergy women and decisions to leave active ministry or a specific position.

As a White researcher with strong commitments to race-critical scholarship, I am interested in interviewing an equal number of clergy Women of Color and White clergy women.

If you or someone you know is a clergy Woman of Color and would like to participate in this research, feel free to contact me. Please share with others!

Participant criteria includes:

1) You identify as a Millennial or Gen X clergy woman (roughly late twenties to early fifties).
2) You have left a pastoral position or active ministry altogether due to concerns over your own boundaries and psychological safety.
3) You have been out of your call situation for at least 6 months and feel comfortable sharing your experiences in ministry.
4) You have at least one mental health professional in your life that you can connect with at any point during this research.
5) You feel comfortable participating in a 60-75 minute one-on-one ZOOM interview with me, with possible follow-up email contact for clarification of interview content.
6) You are willing to have excerpts from your interview published with the removal of your name and any identifying factors

Interested participants will be emailed an informed consent form with more details prior to entering the study.

APPENDIX D: CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS EMAIL

Subject: Call for Research Participants: Women clergy Boundaries and Psychological Safety

Hello,

My name is Lynn Horan and I'm completing my PhD dissertation on Gen X and Millennial women clergy who have left a pastoral call or active ministry due to violations of their personal/professional boundaries and/or threats to their psychological safety. I am looking to work with roughly 30 clergy, representing diverse racial identities and sexual orientations. Participants will review an informed consent form with more details prior to entering the study. Following consent, I will conduct a 60-75 minute unstructured one-on-one ZOOM interview with each participant. Interviews to begin in January 2024.

Participant criteria includes:

- You are a Gen X or Millennial women clergy.
- You are ordained in a mainline Protestant denomination, with an established history of female ordination.
- You have left a pastoral position or active ministry altogether due to issues of boundaries and psychological safety.
- You have been out of the problematic call situation for at least 6 months and feel comfortable sharing your experiences in ministry.
- You have at least one mental health professional in your life that you can connect with at any point during this research.
- You are willing to have your interview audio recorded, with excerpts from your testimony published. Your name and identifying factors will be removed.

If you are interested or would like to learn more, please contact me. Also please forward to others who may be interested.

APPENDIX E: INTRODUCTORY EMAIL

Subject: Thank you your interest in my research on women clergy psychological safety

Dear [enter participant's name here],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my PhD dissertation on women clergy boundaries and psychological safety. In participating in this study, you will be sharing your experiences as a women clergy who has left a pastoral position or active ministry due to violations of your own personal and professional boundaries and/or threats to your physical or psychological safety.

I will be employing what is known as a grounded theory approach, which involves asking a single question at the top of the interview and following your lead throughout the conversation. I am primarily interested in understanding your experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and how concerns over your own boundaries and psychological safety resulted in you decision to leave a pastoral call or active ministry altogether.

Prior to the interview I will be emailing you three documents:

1. Formal Invitation Letter
2. Informed Consent Form
3. Brief Demographical Survey

After reviewing the above documents, you will have time to ask any further questions or concerns may have about participating in this study. Once we have clarified the criteria and details of participating in the study and you would still like to participate, you will complete the informed consent form and survey via Survey Monkey.

After providing your formal consent to participating in this study, I will email you to arrange a convenient time to complete your Zoom interview. The one-on-one interview will be conducted by myself and last roughly 60-75 minutes, Interviews will be scheduled between January and February 2024, based on participants' availability.

Thank you again for your interested in participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Lynn Horan

APPENDIX F: FORMAL LETTER OF INVITATION

Experiences of Protestant women clergy who have left a pastoral call or active ministry due to concerns over their own personal boundaries and psychological safety

by Lynn Horan
Antioch University
PhD Program in Leadership and Change

Participant Letter of Invitation

PhD Dissertation Topic: Experiences of Protestant women clergy who have left a pastoral call or active ministry due to concerns over their own personal boundaries and psychological safety

Dear Research Participant,

My name is Lynn and I am an ordained pastor within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), no longer serving in active ministry, and a PhD candidate in Antioch University's Graduate School of Leadership and Change. As part of this degree, I will be conducting my dissertation study on the lived experiences of female Protestant clergy who have left a pastoral call or active ministry due to concerns over their own personal and professional boundaries and psychological safety.

I am extremely grateful for your interest in participating in this study. Below you will find further details about the study, my background as the principal investigator, and two attachments, which include an informed consent form and demographic survey.

You may talk with anyone about this research at any time. If at any time you have questions or concerns, feel free to contact me.

Dissertation Summary:

In today's mainline Protestant churches, young women clergy navigate a precarious leadership space. While female ordination is well-established in American Protestantism (Burnett, 2017), expectations of pastoral servant leadership coupled with engrained gendered expectations of female self-sacrifice (Page, 2016, Greene & Robbins, 2015) continue to present significant challenges for young women clergy in senior-level pastoral positions (Campbell-Reed, 2019).

Pastor-parishioner conflict is an ever-present reality for Protestant clergy due to the high levels of boundary permeability within congregational church culture and restricted clerical authority in Protestant church governance. However, there are cases in which relational conflict escalates and clergy undergo "forced" resignations (Dowding et al., 2012, p. 115), in which they are effectively driven by a small group of disaffected parishioners and denominational leaders.

While church-based scholarship has explored the phenomena of "clergy killing" (Rediger, 1997, Maynard, 2010) and more recent business management literature addresses the gendered elements of push-to-leave forces (Dwivedi et al., 2023), executive or managerial derailment (Bono et al., 2017), and the glass cliff phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007), there is no existing research on the social processes that impact women clergy derailment and subsequent decisions to leave active ministry.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the experiences of Gen X and Millennial female Protestant clergy who have left active ministry because they felt that their personal and professional boundaries were violated or their physical or psychological safety was threatened. Through a grounded theory study, I seek to identify the underlying social processes between mainline Protestant clergy, parishioners, and church governance structures that contribute to women clergy decisions to leave active ministry.

The goals of this study are to 1) Gain greater understanding of the lived experiences of Gen X and Millennial female Protestant clergy 2) Build pathways of advocacy for young female pastors as they navigate their congregations and denominational governing structures and 3) Support currently active women clergy and give voice to those who have left or are currently leaving active ministry.

The primary method of data collection will be 60-75 minute one-on-one in-depth unstructured interviews conducted over Zoom, which will prioritize the voice, perspective and lived experiences of each clergy participant.

Biographical Sketch:

Lynn Horan is an ordained clergy in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), interfaith spiritual director and embodied leadership coach specializing in women's holistic leadership development. Her research on women clergy leadership boundaries has been presented at the International Leadership Association's Virtual Summit on Diversity, Equity Inclusion and Belonging and the Global Center for Religious Research's E-Conference on Religious Trauma. She is the author of Activism, performance and spiritual ritual: The roots of embodied social change in *Leadership at the spiritual edge: Emerging and non-western concepts of leadership and spirituality* (Routledge Studies in Leadership Research, 2024). Lynn is also a former health policy analyst for the New York State Senate and cross-cultural family counselor, having worked in homeless advocacy and domestic violence prevention in communities in upstate New York and Central Peru. A trained dancer and yoga practitioner, Lynn believes strongly in the restorative capacity of movement and embodied expression as a means of cultivating healing, wholeness and reconciliation in individuals and communities.

Thank you again for your interest in participating in this study. As you look over the attached informed consent form and demographic survey, feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,
Lynn Horan, MDiv, PhD (2024)
Antioch University

APPENDIX G: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Experiences of Protestant women clergy who have left a pastoral call or active ministry due to concerns over their own personal boundaries and psychological safety

by Lynn Horan
Antioch University
PhD Program in Leadership and Change

Demographic Survey

PhD Dissertation Topic: Experiences of Protestant women clergy who have left a pastoral call or active ministry due to concerns over their own personal boundaries and psychological safety

Dear Research Participant,

Having expressed interest in my doctoral dissertation on women clergy boundaries and psychological safety, you are invited to complete the following demographic survey. The purpose of the survey is to promote diverse representation of women clergy participants. Your name and any identifying information will be removed in the dissertation write-up as well as in any future publications.

1) Personal/Professional Background:

Age:

Race:

Other aspects of identity (optional):

Denominational Affiliation:

Date of ordination:

Ordained church leadership positions held:

Most recent ordained leadership position held:

Professional experience prior to ministry leadership:

2) Problematic ministry context:

Please describe the ministry context that you left (may or may not be your most recent pastoral position).

Denomination:

Church size and general demographics:

Geographic region (ex. Midwest, Northeast)

Details of surrounding community (ex. urban/suburban/rural, political leanings, common professions)

The church's previous pastoral leadership (ex. solo or multi-pastor, gender/age and length of service of previous pastors if these details are known)

Any other general information about your most recent ministry context:

APPENDIX H: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Experiences of Protestant women clergy who have left active ministry due to concerns over their own personal boundaries and psychological safety

by Lynn Horan
Antioch University
PhD Program in Leadership and Change

<u>Research Participant Informed Consent Form</u>

Project Title: Experiences of Protestant women clergy who have left active ministry due to concerns over their own personal boundaries and psychological safety

Principle Investigator: Rev. Lynn Horan

Dissertation Chair: Harriet Schwartz, Ph.D.

You will be given a copy of this form.

Introduction:

My name is Lynn Horan and I am an ordained pastor within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), no longer serving in active ministry, and a PhD candidate in Antioch University's Graduate School of Leadership and Change. As part of this degree, I am completing a study that focuses on the lived experiences of female Protestant clergy who have left a pastoral call or active ministry due to concerns over their own personal and professional boundaries and psychological safety.

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in this study. Below is further information about the study, what to expect as a participant, and an opportunity for you to consent to be a participant in this study. You may talk with anyone about this research at any time. If at any time you have questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me. At the end of the informed consent process, a copy of the signed consent form will be provided to you for your records.

Study Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of Gen X and Millennial women clergy as they negotiate their own personal and professional boundaries within mainline Protestant congregations. Despite the unprecedented number of female Protestant seminary graduates and the growing proportion of women serving in high-level pastoral leadership positions, there has been a significant increase in young women clergy leaving active ministry in early- to mid-career stages.

This study is intended to generate new knowledge around the relational dynamics between young female pastors, congregations and denominational governing structures, in order to build pathways of

advocacy for women clergy and give voice to those who have left active ministry. The primary method of data collection will be in-depth unstructured interviews conducted over Zoom, which will prioritize the voice, perspective and lived experiences of each clergy participant.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is 100% voluntary.

Participant Criteria and Selection:
You are being invited to take part in this project because you are:
- A Gen X or Millennial women clergy from a mainline Protestant denomination.
- You have resigned from a pastoral call or left active ministry due to concerns over your own personal or professional boundaries and psychological safety.
- You have been away from the problematic pastoral call or ministry context for at least 6 months.
- You have the contact information of a mental health professional to whom you can reach out at any point during this study.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw:
You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without being penalized for the decision not to participate. The investigator of this study also has the right to discontinue your participation at any time from the study.

Audio Recorded Interview:
As a participant of this study, you will be asked to:
- Participate in a 60-75 minute interview via Zoom.
- Agree to have the Zoom interview audio-recorded and transcribed.
- Participate in the review of the interview transcript and express, via Zoom, phone, or email any corrections or additional ideas.

Benefits/Reimbursements:
I understand that this project is of a research nature and will offer no monetary incentive or any other financial benefit to me. However potential benefits could include:

> ***Direct benefit to participants:*** A possible benefit that may arise for participants may be increased self-awareness, the opportunity to reflect, and meaningful sharing, which may help participants process their experiences of ministry, and provide possible closure as they move forward in their personal and professional lives.
>
> ***Benefits to others:*** A possible benefit for others may be the ability to learn more about the unique challenges faced by women clergy and the identification of systemic social, relational, and structural dynamics within Protestant church culture that contribute to women clergy leaving active ministry. Insights drawn from this research may provide important advocacy channels for women clergy still active parish ministry and those who have left active ministry.

Risks:
No study is completely risk-free. However, the Primary Investigator (PI) – Lynn Horan – does not anticipate that you will be harmed or distressed in any way during the course of this study or after. You may stop being in the project at any time if you become uncomfortable.

Confidentiality:
All information will be de-identified, so that it cannot be connected back to you. Your official name will be replaced with pseudonym of your choosing in the write-up of this study, and only the PI will have access to the list connecting your name to the pseudonyms. This list, along with interview audio recordings and transcripts, will be kept in a secured location.

Limits of Privacy/Confidentiality:
Generally speaking, I can assure you that I will maintain the privacy and confidentiality of everything you share with me during this project. Yet there are times where I cannot keep things private (confidential), such as:

- a child or vulnerable adult has been abused
- a person plans to hurt him or herself, such as commit suicide,
- a person plans to hurt someone else,

There are laws that require many professionals to take action if they think a person is at risk for self-harm or are self-harming, harming another or if a child or adult is being abused. In most states, there is a government agency that must be told if someone is being abused or plans to self-harm or harm another person. Please ask any questions you may have about this issue before agreeing to be in the study. It is important that you do not feel betrayed if it turns out that I cannot keep some things private.

Brief Demographic Survey:
Attached to this Informed Consent Form is a brief demographical survey. This information will be used solely for the study and will help to achieve an accurate representation of the participants in this research study.

Future Publication:
The PI reserves the right to include any results of this study in future scholarly presentations and/or publications. All information will be de-identified prior to publication.

Who to Contact:
If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask at any time both during and after the course of this study.

Ethical Concerns:
If you have any ethical concerns about this study, please contact
Lisa Kreeger, PhD, Chair, Institutional Review Board
Antioch University, Graduate School of Leadership and Change

The proposal for this study has been reviewed and the PI has received approval to proceed by the Antioch International Review Board (IRB), which is a committee whose task it is to provide guidance and oversight to ensure that research participants are protected. If you wish to find out more about the IRB, please contact Lisa Kreeger, Ph.D.

---- Please continue to last page for signed consent ----

DO YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?

I have read the information regarding this study. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and they have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study, and to let the researcher audio record me for the purposes of this study.

Print Name of Participant: ____

Signature of Participant: ____

Date ___________________________
Day/month/year

TO BE FILLED OUT BY THE RESEARCHER:

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and that consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Researcher: Lynn Horan

Signature of Researcher: ________________________________

Date ___________________________
Day/month/year