

ABSTRACT

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRITICAL SPIRITUAL INCIDENTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON PASTORS' CALLING, MINISTRY PHILOSOPHY AND SUCCESS IN MINISTRY

by

Timothy Walter Ehrlich

This dissertation looks at the relationship between critical spiritual incidences and their impact on pastors' sense of their own calling into ministry, their philosophy of ministry, and their success in ministry. This topic was selected to see (1) if evidence could be found that highly successful pastors typically had one or more antecedent critical spiritual incidents or episodes that they felt contributed to or resulted in their calling to ministry, (2) how these critical spiritual episodes contributed to shaping the philosophy of ministry and success of these pastors, and (3) if any pattern of behaviors or practices could be revealed as independent variables resulting in the perception of measurable efficacy as a result of the occurrence of these critical spiritual incidents. An analysis of the literature on this subject reasons a link between a pastor's vocational efficacy and antecedent critical spiritual incidents.

Twelve criteria-nominated clergy were selected from the 720 churches of the Florida Annual Conference for semi-structured ninety-minute interviews. The selection criteria included the following: Clergy had to have served churches that grew significantly under their leadership to an attendance mark of over seven hundred, and they also had to be nominated as a *highly successful pastor* by two of the Florida district

superintendents and the bishop. Eleven theory-informed questions were asked as well as additional spontaneous questions when needed.

To test the clarity and efficacy of the survey instrument my pastors in my circle of clergy friends were selected to receive the survey interview and rate each question for its clarity and efficacy. These pastors were not noted for their successfulness but were more typical or average pastors. The answers of the test group were included as a reference group because their answers were striking different from the twelve criteria-nominated clergy.

My initial hypothesis was that research would find a relationship between critical spiritual incidents and clergy success; this proved to be only partially correct. I had expected to find the select pastors to be virtually uniformly empowered and impassioned for ministry by large scale, dramatic, and/or miraculous critical spiritual incidents. Instead, I found that they were primarily empowered and impassioned by small scale seemingly minor spiritual experiences. I was not surprised that 50 percent of the subject pastors had dramatic mystical-type experiences, leading them to feel called into ministry, including forty-one percent who experienced God speaking to them directly concerning their calling. I was surprised that only 20 percent derived their primary empowerment, energy, and passion for ministry from these critical spiritual incidents.

The research identified a total of five factors that all the subject pastors had in common related to their empowerment, energy, and passion for ministry with one overarching unifying factor unifying all five of these factors—passion for serving God through Jesus Christ:

- a rock-solid, unshakeable sense of being called;

- a commitment to healthiness in body, mind, spirit and emotion;
- a great commitment to the 2 great commandments;
- a great commitment to the great commission; and,
- a competence in ministry practices.

Every one of the twelve subject pastors described their sense of being called as being rock solid and compelling—their foundation for how they are living their lives and practicing their faith and ministries. Surprisingly, 100 percent of these subject pastors expressed a disciplined commitment to four important healthiness practices: improving their minds, exercising their bodies, receiving support for their emotions, and nurturing their spirituality.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRITICAL SPIRITUAL INCIDENTS
AND THEIR IMPACT ON PASTORS' CALLING, MINISTRY PHILOSOPHY
AND SUCCESS IN MINISTRY

presented by

Timothy Walter Ehrlich

has been accepted towards fulfillment

of the requirements for the

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY degree at

Asbury Theological Seminary

Mentor

Date

Internal Reader

Date

Representative, Doctor of Ministry Program

Date

Dean of the Beeson Center

Date

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRITICAL SPIRITUAL INCIDENTS
AND THEIR IMPACT ON PASTORS' CALLING, MINISTRY PHILOSOPHY
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A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of
Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by

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May 2016

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first became involved in Asbury Theological Seminary through Dale Galloway. I attended several seminars he taught on leadership, and at one of them he was recruiting pastors to participate in the Beeson Scholars program that he was running at that time. At that time Asbury was offering the Doctor of Ministry degree through participation in three annual seminars in the settings of churches that specialized in certain areas of ministry. I attended three of these seminars independently and decided to enroll in the DMIN program, but just at that same time the program ended due to lack of funding. Having made the decision to go for a DMIN I decided to enroll in the program at the Wilmore campus.

At Asbury for the first time, I was so impressed by Dr. Milton Lowe. He was and is a wonderful ambassador of the program. He shepherded me along at every point in my journey. Dr. Russell West taught one of the classes I attended, and we learned we had the Marine Corps in common and other things as well. He also helped and guided me along the way. The DMIN program at Asbury has been extremely helpful to my ministry and to my personal spiritual development. What I learned through the DMIN program will stay with me always.

My wonderful wife, Anna, has always supported me in everything I have done in ministry. Her pride in my accomplishments has spurred me on and her constant love has been a continual source of blessing and strength for me. Oakhurst United Methodist Church has provided a generous reimbursable fund for me that has covered the majority of my expenses related to this degree and have given me generous amounts of study time to complete the work.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

My first church assignment after graduating from Duke Divinity School was in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York. I was appointed as a local pastor (not yet ordained) to serve a two-point charge (i.e., one pastor serving two churches)—the Olivebridge and Samsonville United Methodist Churches. This was a minimum salary appointment. I was following a pastor who had two young children and I had two young children. These were relatively tiny rural churches. Samsonville consisted of the church, a firehouse, and a general store—no post office. The church averaged about thirty people in worship, and they were proud that they had just that year added a meeting room with indoor plumbing to the back of the church. The outhouse, a two-seater with a men's side and a women's side, was still functional about thirty yards into the woods behind the church. Olivebridge was larger; it had a fellowship hall and modern kitchen. The two churches had been in decline for over twenty-five years, decreasing in attendance each year for over twenty-five years. I served there two years, and by the time I left attendance was at about 150—up from about 80.

My next appointment was to the Sherburne and Smyrna United Methodist churches, another two-point charge in upstate New York in which both churches had also been in steady decline for nearly thirty years. I served there four years and attendance doubled while the church added many new members. On one Sunday we received twenty-four new members at one time. They filled the entire front of the church from side to side. A photo of the group, taken from the balcony as they turned to face the

congregation to be welcomed, made the front page of the annual conference newspaper, as well as the local newspaper.

Lots of people were asking me how I did it. I was following church growth consultant Herb Miller's advice to start and end the services exactly on time, have the services move along quickly with no dead spaces, and have them be user friendly such that an unchurched individual would not get lost. I had an attractive young family and we were friendly and approachable. All of that was important, but in time I came to realize other pastors were friendly and approachable and ran timely worship but without the same results, so I was puzzled. My next church was the same story: attendance grew steadily and over 150 new members were added to two small rural churches in the Pocono Mountains in five years. And the church I served after that, in Florida, had been averaging about sixty new members a year and increased to 120 new members a year in the time I served there.

I read dozens of books on evangelism and church growth during the first fifteen years of my ministry. I attended dozens of seminars on evangelism and church growth and I knew all the techniques and gimmicks and program ideas to increase attendance and for a long time I thought that these techniques and gimmicks and program ideas were the key to my or anyone's success. In time I started focusing on another set of questions brought on by the painful reality I was experiencing the truth of the old saying that ministry is hard because (a pastor's) sheep bite. I was on the receiving end of numerous personal and professional attacks on my competency and ministry style. In spite of having had amazing success in revitalizing six failing churches in my first three appointments, at least one significant church leader in five of the six first churches I

served acted in the most unchristian manner towards me and/or my family, and these attacks were deeply, deeply painful: so painful that I considered leaving ministry.

As a result of the pain I was going through I began asking myself what kept me going in spite of the sometimes-crushing pain? I was not discouraged in situations that I knew would have crushed other people in the same setting. I wondered where my strength was coming from and at the same time I wondered why anyone who is sincerely doing their best to serve God should unwarranted attacks from so-called Christian leaders. At the same time I was experienced the joy that pastors get of being loved and accept by their congregations and receiving confirmation that I was really doing what I was supposed to be doing.

I realized my strength was coming from my vision and passion for serving God that kept me going through the pain. I have always had a clear vision of what God wants me to accomplish, and I have a deep love for God that frequently floods my soul. My vision and my passion flowed from a close personal relationship with God in which I frequently felt and even experienced God's presence in some miraculous ways. These spiritual experiences shaped my philosophy of ministry and influenced me to take up the ministry practices (techniques, gimmicks, and program ideas, as well as spiritual disciplines) that led to my success. I became curious about other pastors who were successful and whether their spiritual experiences at the deepest level were ultimately responsible for the success they were enjoying.

Problem

The Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, and the United Methodist denomination itself, is suffering from a multiyear-long decline in membership

and attendance. As I sat in the annual conference meetings, year after year, listening to the conference statistician tell us of the annual decline of Methodism in Florida—8,000 members per year, I thought about my own work countering that trend and of other pastors whose churches were also growing while the rest were declining, and I wondered, is there a formula for success, is there a common denominator, or set of common traits or practices among the highly successful pastors. I felt certain that they had to have a common denominator. I posited that, like me, the pastors of these growing churches would have an underlying foundation of profound spiritual experiences that shaped their ministry philosophies and empowered them to maintain ministry practices that helped them grow their churches while others around them did not see growth occurring. If this was true then logically, pastors seeking ministry success should start by seeking spiritual experiences to help inform and shape their practices and ministry philosophies.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to uncover the extent to which select pastors of the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church attribute their success, in whole or in part (e.g., their ministry philosophies and their longevity in ministry), to having had critical spiritual incidents or experiences that occurred prior to or soon after they entered into ministry as their profession.

Research Questions

This research surveyed a representative selection of pastors of *highly successful* pastors to determine to what they attribute their ministerial effectiveness. The survey conducted for this study gathered both qualitative and quantitative information related to the pastors' years of work, spiritual experience, vocational passion, and ministry

effectiveness. The research was both purposeful in its sampling and homogeneous in the sense that it focused exclusively on full-time pastors from the Florida Annual Conference who were employed in a church setting and whose churches, came under their leadership and were perceived as models of health and vitality.

Research Question #1

How do selected pastors describe the sources of their ability to stimulate church growth? My research assumption was that pastors will reference significant spiritual experiences as contributing to their ministry philosophies, which, in turn, inform ministry practices to which they will attribute their *effectiveness*.

Research Question #2

What common denominator arises from the discourse about antecedent spiritual experiences among select pastors? Widespread agreement exists in literature both that critical spiritual incidents lead a person to perceiving a clear vision of a task or calling from God and to having a passionate commitment to its realization and that perceiving a clear vision of a task or calling from God and having a passionate commitment to its realization are critical to success (Mayo;Walters; Warren, “Restate”). Therefore, the assumption is that highly successful pastors will have had critical spiritual incidents to which they credit their success.

Research Question #3

How do select pastors make connections between and/or distinctions between the chain of antecedent spiritual experiences they have had and the ministry philosophies they have formed and between the chain of antecedent spiritual experiences and evidence-based results that meet local criteria for *effectiveness*. My research assumption

was that select pastors can isolate confounding variables that may also explain effectiveness and that conform to theoretical models of efficacy but will likely refer to antecedent spiritual experiences.

Definition of Terms

Three terms were used repeatedly in this study: spiritual experience, vocational passion, and ministerial or pastoral effectiveness.

Spiritual experience has been defined by psychologists seeking to find a single process definition that will be equally meaningful to people of different cultural backgrounds (Hinterkopf 165). Spiritual experience has also been defined by medical doctors seeking to understand the chemistry of the brain (Nelson), and by self-proclaimed gurus seeking followers (“What Is a Spiritual Experience). William James, famed psychologist, writes about the difficulties of defining personal religious experience:

personal religious experience has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness... The words “mysticism” and “mystical” are often used as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast and sentimental, and without a base in either facts or logic.

So, to keep it useful by restricting it, I will do what I did in the case of the word “religion,” and simply propose to you four marks which, when an experience has them, may justify us in calling it mystical. (5087-88).

His mark number one of a spiritual experience shows the challenge: the definition of a spiritual experience includes the statement that spiritual experience is typically not definable. Here are his four criteria. First is *ineffability*, which he defines as defying definition: “No adequate report of its content can be given in words” (5089). Second, it has to have a *noetic quality*, by which he means that it brings insight, illuminations, and revelations into truths previously not explored by the subject, which also are significant and important to the individual and carry with them also a sense that they now have

authority. Third is *transiency*. They do not last long, at most an hour or two, and fourth is *passivity*—a sense of being related to a higher power, or in the presence of a higher power, or being grasped by a higher power, such that one's own will is entirely subject to the higher power, and what remains afterwards is a profound sense of the importance of the phenomena (5089).

In his book, W. T. Stace, professor of philosophy at Princeton, elaborates on the mystical nature brought out by James. He identifies two forms of spiritual experience, “the extrovertive,” in which one looks outward to the world through the physical senses and finds a sense of the higher power, and “the introvertive” experience in which one turns inward and has a transcendent experience without the benefit of the five senses (qtd. in Nelson).

The Bible's treatment of the phenomena of spiritual experience points to the difficulty of a short and simple definition. The Bible describes a continuum or range of God's power being displayed. A good example is the voice of God: God speaks to the prophet Elijah in a whisper (1 Kings 19:12), in a conversational tone to Moses (Exod. 19:19), and the Psalms describe the voice of God being like thunder (68:33) and having the power to melt the earth (46:6). Sometimes the actions of God leave room for doubt such as when Gideon put out a fleece on two nights because the sign was not indisputable after the first night. Pastor and author Jorge Acevedo describes his interpretation of the range of spiritual experience: some experiences are as clear as light switches being flipped on and some are like a rheostat—slowly and gradually becoming clear. Spiritual experience embraces or encompasses a wide range of phenomena or incidents. However, defining spiritual experience is similar to defining Methodism: even though Methodism

encompasses many different components, including elements of theology, doctrine, and organization, we still can find a suitable working definition for Methodism. In the same way, a spiritual experience or critical spiritual incident or episode includes multiple elements of both an internal and external nature, but we can still find a suitable working definition.

For the purposes of this study, a *spiritual experience* or *critical spiritual incident* or *episode* is defined as an event or occurrence in the life of the pastor, in which the pastor felt or perceived the presence of God, or the action of God, or received a new insight into the reality or nature of God and which event or incident was taken as an authority for his or her philosophy of ministry or theology. The result of a critical spiritual incident is that the individual feels closer to God or grows in their love of or desire for God. This definition encompasses the internal and external spiritual experience and both noetic and passivity qualities described by James.

The words *or episode* were included in recognition that some milestone events might not be restricted to a single point in time. For example, a mother's child is in critical condition in the intensive care unit following a car accident. The doctors have tried everything. Day after day passes but the child is just not responding. They are not promising anything. The mother invites a pastor to come and anoint her child. They pray together fervently for her unconscious child. Then miraculously and without any medical explanation, within moments a noticeable improvement is observed in the child. In time, the child steadily improves, and the next day moves out of danger. As a result the mother's faith is reshaped to understand God as a God who cares and who is willing to intervene in response to our prayers. Her practice of faith is now reshaped as well in that

when others tell her about the problems and/or disasters they are facing, she tells them with the authority of experience to pray because God has the power and is willing to help.

Ministerial practices include prayer, fasting, meditating, reading Scripture, taking the sacraments, speaking to people about their Christian beliefs, being involved in a Bible study group or accountability group, and performing acts of charitable service. These practices are referred to in both Methodist and Roman Catholic theology as the means of grace and are not limited to clergy (“Wesleyan Means of Grace”).

Ministry philosophy or philosophy of ministry are the beliefs a pastor has about what Christian ministry is, what a minister does, what God is calling the church to do, and how a church should be managed. A philosophy of ministry “is the meeting point of beliefs and task” (Daniel).

Effectiveness: Dr. Anna Wojtczak defines *effectiveness* in the context of medical treatment: “A measure of the extent to which a specific intervention, procedure, regimen, or service, when deployed in the field in routine circumstances, does what it is intended to do for a specified population” (qtd. in Debrincat 24). The Quality Analytic Glossary defines effectiveness this way: “Effectiveness is the extent to which an activity fulfills its intended purpose or function” (“Effectiveness”). *BusinessDictionary* defines effectiveness as “the efficiency with which an association is able to meet its objectives.” For the purposes of this study, the terms *highly successful* and *effective* are used interchangeably, and highly successful and/or effective pastors are defined as those who have led their churches to become perceived in their communities and by the bishop and district superintendents of the Florida Annual Conference as models of health and vitality.

The definition of health and vitality that I gave to Bishop Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., the presiding bishop of the Florida Annual Conference include:

- pastors whose leadership he considers exemplary,
 - pastors whose churches are reporting growth in membership and attendance,
- and
- pastors whose churches are perceived in their communities and by the bishop and his cabinet as examples of excellence or outstanding success in accomplishing the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

The working definition for for *vocational passion* is a consuming desire to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. This desire both empowers and drives the individual to serve Christ such that the pastor believes he or she *cannot do anything else* as a vocation.

A *healthy Church*, for the purposes of this research, is perceived as exemplary in carrying out the ministries of Christ as he defined them to Peter after his resurrection to feed and take care of his sheep (based on John 21:15-17) and the stated mission of the United Methodist denomination's *Book of Discipline*. Here is what the discipline says:

The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by proclaiming the good news of God's grace and by exemplifying Jesus' command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world. The fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world is the vision Scripture holds before us (91).

Obviously *the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ* covers a wide range of activities and functions, and virtually every church carries out the mission and ministry a little differently.

Ministry Project

Fourteen criteria-nominated clergy were selected by the bishop of the Florida Annual Conference from its 720 churches for semi-structured, ninety-minute interviews. I asked the bishop to nominate pastors with the following selection criteria:

- are or were employed full-time in pastoral ministry in the Florida Annual Conference (recently retired would be fine),
- have leadership he considers exemplary,
- have churches that are perceived in their communities and by the bishop and his cabinet as examples of excellence or outstanding success in accomplishing the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, and
- have churches reporting growth in membership and attendance and if possible have an average attendance mark of over seven hundred.

Six demographic questions and eleven theory-informed questions were asked of each participant. The questions were formed by referencing suggestions on questionnaire research design that I got from Mildred L. Patten on structuring questions in such a way as to eliminate or mitigate any ambiguity (9-28). I screened the questions for reliability and validity using the suggestions of John W. Creswell (“Educational Research” 225-29), and for awareness of the existence of possible variables for success as suggested by Pajares overview of social cognition and of self-efficacy (Frank Pajares). I also asked additional spontaneous questions when needed to help bring out the fullest possible answer.

The four main research assumptions of this dissertation were first, that highly successful pastors all had multiple, powerful, critical spiritual incidents either at the

beginning of their ministry, or which resulted in them entering into ministry. Second, that these spiritual experiences shaped their vision of, and philosophy for ministry. Third, that these incidents empowered and energized them to serve, and fourth, that I would be able to identify a pattern of behaviors or actions concerning when, how, and under what circumstances these critical incidents unfolded, so that possibly others could follow that pattern and become more successful in ministry themselves.

To test out the interview format and the clarity and importance of the survey questions I interviewed six clergy friends. These are Methodists pastors from my circle of friends who were selected purely for convenience. These pastors could be considered average pastors as none are known for their ministerial success.

The interviews were conducted face to face with the selected pastors at their offices, during the sessions of the Annual Conference in a small meeting room in the conference center or, in some cases, in a restaurant over lunch.

Context

The survey was only crafted and administered in English (see Appendix A). All of the pastors selected by the bishop (referred to from here on as *select pastors*) to take the survey coincidentally spoke English as a first language and were United Methodist pastors who were employed in full-time pastoral ministry within the Florida Annual Conference. All but two of the select pastors interviewed were serving churches of at least seven hundred in average attendance. The others served churches significantly larger than the average attendance of eighty-nine for a United Methodist Church. All pastors selected were nominated by their chief denominational authority—the bishop—as being perceived as the most effective and successful pastors in terms of fulfilling the

highest hopes or expectations of performance with their churches being seen as models of health and vitality, and for their success in accomplishing the denomination's stated goals for a local church in carrying out the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ as described in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* (91).

The pastors selected by the bishop were from every corner of the state: Tallahassee in the north and west of Florida, Jacksonville in the northeast, Miami in the southeast to Naples in the southwest to Lakeland and Orlando in the center of the state. All were serving urban or suburban settings with none in a rural setting. To encourage their participation, and in an effort to maintain scrupulous honesty, the selected pastors who were asked to participate in this survey were told in advance of the survey and that they were nominated by the bishop.

A focus group of six Methodist clergy who are friends or acquaintances of mine agreed to be interviewed to test the format, clarity and value of the survey instrument questions. These pastors (i.e., the *reference group*) filled out an evaluation of the questions as they were surveyed. This group included one women and five men, all in full-time pastoral appointments or retired. Two were second career pastors.

Methodology

The research used a mixed-design survey that gathered both qualitative and quantitative information and was conducted in the form of a live interview with the interviewer asking questions and writing down the responses on a standardized form (see Appendix A). The survey was both purposeful in its sampling and homogeneous in the sense that it focused exclusively on full-time pastors who were employed in pastoral ministry within the Florida Annual Conference. The survey was divided between

quantitative and qualitative questions. Part one asked six demographic questions, these were about the pastors' ages, education, length of service, and appointive history.

Part two was the qualitative research of the survey, which asked seven questions related to the pastors' calling, self-perceived vocational passion, ministry philosophy, and level of effectiveness, in general and in relation to their spiritual experiences. Prior to conducting part two of the interview, the select pastors were given a written copy of the definition of spiritual experience or critical spiritual incident or episode. The definitions were summarized verbally and each pastor was asked, "Do you understand and accept the definition of spiritual experience or critical spiritual incident or episode as I have explained it to you?" The survey concluded with an invitation to clergy to share their stories. Several of the most compelling stories are recorded in Appendix C.

Participants

The select pastors in this study were nominated by the bishop of the Florida Annual Conference, Rev. Kenneth Carter, from his knowledge of the Florida Annual Conference clergy obtained through his five years of supervision of conference pastors. No regard was given to narrowing the sample by years in ministry, gender, or educational level. All were members in full connection to the Florida Annual Conference or, in one case had recently retired; all had at least an MDiv.

Instrumentation

One mixed-design survey was used that featured six demographic questions about the pastors' age, education, length of service and appointive history, and eleven qualitative questions about the pastors' calling, self-perceived vocational passion, ministry philosophy and level of effectiveness, and their spiritual experiences (see

Appendix A). Bandura's model of sources of self-efficacy (i.e. past experiences, learning from others, coaching, and physiological and emotional state) contributed to the formulation of the questions.

The survey instrument was vetted by a reference group of six willing clergy participants to get feedback on the effectiveness and value of the questions. They rated each question as it was asked to give feedback on its clarity and usefulness, and they were also given the opportunity to make any suggestions to help clarify or improve any of the questions. All the questions were found to be clear and acceptable without exceptions. One suggestion was made, which I did incorporate, to ask question 9 about whether the select pastors had experienced one or more critical spiritual incidents earlier than in ninth place since it helps contextualize some of the other questions.

Data Collection

The select pastors were asked each question in the survey, and, in the case of the qualitative questions, occasional impromptu questions were asked to help elicit the fullest responses to survey questions. The surveys were conducted in person during the months of May and June 2016 and resulted in eighteen completed responses: six from the reference group and twelve from the select pastors. The interviews were conducted in person, in most cases in the office of the select pastor, although several interviews were conducted over lunch, and several were conducted in meeting rooms in and around the Annual Conference meeting in Orlando.

Before beginning, each select pastor was given, read, and signed The Informed Consent Form (see Appendix D). The pastors were also given a sheet of paper giving the definitions of the terms being used in the survey to read in advance (see Appendix B).

The survey question interview form was used each time, and each of the questions were asked of each pastor. I filled out the answer sheet for each question as the answer was being given. The interviews were recorded on an iPad as well. Immediately after the interview was completed I took some time to read over the answer form and think about the answers on paper to make sure everything important was noted. After all twelve interviews were completed the results were tabulated for each question and the comments noted.

Data Analysis

Demographic questions were asked of the select clergy to see if there was a pattern or commonality among pastors in the demographic information. The qualitative data was analyzed for common independent variables concerning how the selected pastors make distinctions between their antecedent spiritual experiences and their ministry philosophies, and between the chain of antecedent spiritual experiences and evidence-based results that meet denominational and local criteria for *effectiveness*. The analysis of the qualitative data also looked to see if common denominators would emerge from the data concerning the prevalence of antecedent critical spiritual experiences, incidents, or episodes among these pastors. Lastly the data was examined to see if a link could be found between the selected pastors' spiritual experiences and their sense of being called into ministry.

Generalizability

Generalizability comes down to three factors. First, one must determine if the results can be duplicated by another researcher using the application of similar methods in a similar setting. The second factor is whether the data collection and analysis is valid.

Qualitative validity means the researcher checks for accuracy of the findings by utilizing accepted standards and measures. The third factor is whether the data collection and analysis is reliable. Qualitative reliability concerns the extent to which results are consistent over time (Creswell, “Educational Research” 171-75). Dependability concerns the results of whether or not a study is trustworthy. In qualitative research, some variability will happen because the context of the study changes. Researchers may use several methods to ensure dependability (169-70).

A strong link has already been established between the number of years a pastor serves in a ministry setting and the ministry success of the pastor. I have personally heard denominational authorities and other experts in church growth making the case that bishops should leave appointed clergy in place for longer periods of time because the length of ministry is believed to contribute to the success of a pastor:

an undeniable relationship between pastoral tenure and church growth. While most growing churches have long-term pastorates, and some non-growing churches have long-term pastorates, it is almost unheard of to find a growing church with many short-term pastorates. (Arn)

I hoped and expected to find, and did indeed find, in my research, this link between longevity in ministry and clergy success.

Theological Foundation

The Jewish religion and the nation of Israel, both the northern and southern kingdoms, experienced repeated cycling between times of renewed religious fervor and declining influence. The story of Moses, the stories of the Judges of Israel, and the stories of the various Kings and their influence on the religious practices of the people show that the cyclical decline and revival of the Church is obviously nothing new. It is a story that has repeated over and over through the centuries from the beginning of Christianity to the

present day. The story is always the same: Leaders receive a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit and they get a huge surge in passion for God and a desire to serve God and a clarity of vision of how God wants them to proceed. With vision, passion, and desire, these leaders start a movement, or order, or ministry, which is supernaturally successful in building up the church or some localized part of it. Then the torch of leadership is passed, and within as little as a generation or as much as a century or two the vision dims and the passion wanes. Often the desire to serve morphs to include or even become the desire for power or survival.

The state of the Anglican church in England prior to and after the advent of John Wesley is a good example. The Anglican church was suffering from lack of attendance and membership. Uninspired leaders gave three-hour dry, dusty sermons and the church became the church for the upper classes. The denomination was also under attack from the new ideas and criticisms of the Bible in the age of Enlightenment, and from a national plague of rampant alcoholism. Wesley gave his every waking moment to God; then having a Holy Spirit experience where the Holy Spirit fell on him as he listened to a sermon, his heart was “strangely warmed” (Works 101). He became suddenly passionate for serving Christ, and his movement grew under his leadership from a dozen members of a holy club at Oxford to over 250,000 in England and over 150,000 in America by the time of his death. After his death the church continued to grow steadily until it reached its height of eleven million in 1968 but not nearly at the rate it had under his leadership (“Developments”). Methodism has been in decline since its formation and now has 7.2 million members (“United Methodists”).

This same pattern is visible in both the Old and New Testaments. Nehemiah is an excellent Old Testament example. When we meet Nehemiah the Jews had been released from their captivity and returned to Israel, but they are acting like a beaten people, languishing in apathy and lethargy, not rebuilding their temple or the city walls and gates of their capital. Nehemiah sought the Lord urgently with prayer and fasting (1:4) asking for God's help. Nehemiah was the king's cup bearer, and the king miraculously allowed him to leave his employment go back to Israel and gave him letters of commandments to the local authorities to supply materials for the rebuilding (2:5-7). When the rebuilding was completed, he led the priests, leaders, and people in a complete reform and return to God. (9:1-3, 38).

In the New Testament the amazing spread of Christianity described in Acts of the Apostles is a great example. The original twelve disciples are taught by Jesus and had a magnificent miraculous commissioning (Acts 2:1-4), and from there the church of Jesus Christ under their leadership entered a time of explosive growth. Within thirty years it spread around the full extension of the 2,300 mile-wide Mediterranean. This growth took place in the face of amazing levels of challenge: major persecutions in which Christians could have their properties confiscated or they could even be put to death for their faith.

The disciples proclaimed this message:

We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, *whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands.* [emphasis mine] He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us. We proclaim to you *what we ourselves have actually seen and heard* [emphasis mine] so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (emphasis mine; 1 John 1:1-3, NLT)

The first generation of those miraculously commissioned by God, claimed personal experience as foundation of their faith and proclamation. As the church moved past the era of direct personal experience it continued to grow, but gradually the initial explosive growth was replaced with a slow, steady growth pattern.

In a real sense therefore, the story of God's people from the time of Abraham to the present day is a story of cyclical decline and revival. The common historical thread that binds every revival together is that every revivalist stands on the same platform: They each have a personal relationship with God, nurtured and bathed in prayer, in which God is experienced and perceived as truly real and present help, their light, love, peace, and strength. This relationship is founded on supernatural experiences of or with God—critical spiritual incidents, which made the apostles *effective apostles*. They became at the same time witnesses, messengers, and performers of the signs and wonders. Acts 28:8-10 describes the results Paul's miraculous healing of Publius' father had on the people of Malta.

The church in America is in a forty-eight year-long decline and in need of revival, effective ministry is critical. In some small way, this study aims to help the goal of revival become a reality, by studying the underlying causes for the ministry philosophies and practice of a select group of clergy who have been identified as highly effective or successful.

Overview

Chapter 2 is a comprehensive critical analysis of journal articles, books, and other reference materials that describe the past and current state of literature and research related to the subject of spiritual experience in clergy and its connection to the formation

of ministry philosophy and practices that yield results typically identified as highly successful and/or effective. Chapter 3 presents a detailed explanation of the project's design, the research methods used, and the methods of data analysis. Chapter 4 reports and interprets the four major findings of this study. Chapter 5 discusses and supports the major findings of the study and lists practical applications that flow out of the research. It concludes with suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE
Introduction

The Christian church in America is hemorrhaging members. The situation has parallels to a familiar Biblical story:

A woman in the crowd had suffered for twelve years with constant bleeding. She had suffered a great deal from many doctors, and over the years she had spent everything she had to pay them, but she had gotten no better. In fact, she had gotten worse. She had heard about Jesus, so she came up behind him through the crowd and touched his robe. For she thought to herself, "If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed." Immediately the bleeding stopped, and she could feel in her body that she had been healed of her terrible condition. (Mark 5:25-29)

Year after year, across all mainline denominations, the sad statistics are repeated. The denominations all are hemorrhaging members and the leaders of the church are at a loss. They have consulted the doctors of the church, paid millions for consultants and programs, and tried all kinds of treatments, but the problem has only gotten worse.

Fortunately many bright spots can still be found: churches that have metaphorically *touched the hem of Jesus' robe*, whose congregations are not hemorrhaging members but are instead thriving, growing steadily, are healthy by any credible measurement, and filled with people who are serving the Lord with joy. Within the Florida Annual Conference, we find that these churches are invariably lead by pastors who are perceived by their peers, churches, communities and denominational authorities as highly successful or effective pastors. My personal experience in twenty-nine years as a pastor in the United Methodist Church in three different annual conferences is that in every annual conference the denominational authorities tend to celebrate the successes and lift up the ministry philosophies and practices that seem to lead these pastors to

success, but no one is looking beneath that level to ask what empowers these pastors! No one has asked what passion may drive their ministry philosophies and practices, or to what inner motivation do they attribute their success. More importantly, an essential lesson may be missed. Surely if a common denominator or similar pattern can be found to the way highly effective or successful clergy proceed from their calling, to establishing their ministry philosophy and practices, to their success, then that pattern might be emulated by those seeking similar levels of success.

Problem

The Apostle Paul observed to Timothy, “Remember that there will be difficult times in the last days. They will hold to the outward form of our religion, but reject its real power. Keep away from such people” (2 Tim. 3:1, 5, GNB). The precipitous declines in membership and attendance in the Florida Annual Conference and the United Methodist denomination itself are evidence they are both suffering the symptoms of a power failure. According to the conference statistician Florida’s membership is declining by eight thousand members per year. Adam Hamilton, in remarks given to the General Conference in 2012, said the denomination has shrunk by an average of seventy thousand members each year for the last fifty years, and is closing an average of three hundred churches per year. Paul wrote that the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17). Methodism is a denominational body of Christ, unfortunately the most accurate picture of Methodism is of a body that has been shot and is slowly and unstoppably bleeding to death. Experts and denominational authorities are apparently powerless to stop this trend; however, in this time of general decline there are pastors who are leading their churches

into such growth in numbers and health that they have come to be identified in their communities and by their denominational authorities as highly successful and effective.

This situation of general decline and isolated pockets of success represents a challenge and an opportunity. The opportunity is to identify the traits that lead some to be successful, and the challenge is to find ways to apply or promote these traits widely enough to make a difference. The research goal of this project was to study a select group of pastors—those who are leading churches that go against the national trend of decline—with an aim to identify a set of common denominators among these pastors, which have helped them help their churches become bright spots in an otherwise gloomy picture. The research assumption was that these pastors will reference significant spiritual experiences that occurred prior to or soon after they entered into ministry as their profession, that they will say contributed to their ministry philosophies and ministry practices to which, in turn, they attribute their *effectiveness*.

Several times I have seen TV commercials in which the salesperson says, “I’m not just a salesman; I’m a satisfied customer.” In a real sense church growth is driven by satisfied customers who recruit their friends and families, therefore common sense would dictate that the decline in the church is due to the church not producing satisfied customers. Many authors claim what people today are looking for from their church is authenticity, from the pulpit and authentic experience of God. Joseph D. Driskill writes, “The failure of mainline Protestant denominations to nurture the spiritual lives of their members has had a stultifying impact on the spiritual development of those under their care” (31). Rather than the Spirit abandoning the church, it seems the church abandoned the Spirit.

In his famous book Richard J. Foster observes: “Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need for today is not a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people” (1). If superficiality is the root of decline in the church, then the cure would seem to be the opposite: a movement back towards experiential religion.

Amos Smith writes, “And the lack of conviction and passion is a big part of the perpetual decline of Mainline Christian Churches” (6). Blogger Rachel Held Evans excoriates the church for attempting to lure millennials back to the church by trying to make church cool instead of authentic: “When I left the church at age 29, full of doubt and disillusionment, I wasn’t looking for a better produced Christianity. I was looking for a truer Christianity, a more authentic Christianity.” Barkley, an advertising agency in Kansas City, conducted one of the largest research studies focusing on the millennial generation in the US. The Barkley study identified several key insights about what Millennials want from church, they identified the number one factor: “Millennials seek out experiences. They want to live life to the fullest. They want adventure.” Spiritual experience therefore, is identified as one of if not the most important factors Millennials are looking for from church and one that they see as representing authentic Christianity and one that they are not finding in church. Authentic experiences of the power of God—critical spiritual incidents—were vital in the early Church. Paul writes, “They were convinced by the power of miraculous signs and wonders and by the power of God’s Spirit. *In this way* [emphasis mine], I have fully presented the Good News of Christ from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum” (Rom. 15:19, NLT). Actions speak louder than words

and one can imagine how loudly the performance of miracles spoke to first century audiences.

Jesus warned his disciples about the scribes and Pharisees: “Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach” (Matt. 23:3, NRSV). According to the Baptist Fellowship Forum, the average pastor only spends five minutes a day in prayer. Another study showed pastors averaging between eight and nine minutes per day (Crawford 160). Other studies have found that the only time many clergy spend reading the Bible is whatever is done in the course of preparing their weekly sermon (Stetzer). While those in the church may struggle to recognize the lack of authentic spiritual experience in worship, the millennial generation perceive a lack of authenticity in the pastors and churches they encounter, and this lack of authenticity has driven and is driving them away in increasing numbers.

I have worshipped in a half-dozen growing megachurches that are attracting Millennials and younger adults in huge numbers. These churches led by pastors who are described with words related to power. They are dynamic, animated, powerful speakers, vigorous and energetic. Obvious being energetic or being dynamic cannot easily be taught or far more megachurches would fill with young people, but possibly spiritual disciplines and practices that empower, and contribute to clergy success can be discerned and taught. This study aimed to discern the both the ministry practices that pastors identified as highly effective use, the ministry philosophies behind the practices, and the foundation of spiritual experiences that energize these pastors for ministry.

The apostle Paul says that the Holy Spirit decides who gets what gift (1 Cor. 12:11), and Paul also tells us that these latent gifts can be activated by our decision to do

so (2 Tim. 1:6). This is a biblical warrant for developing or activating a person's gifts through intentional effort. This chapter is a look back at the writings of Christian saints and leaders through several periods of history up to the present day to try to find the link between spiritual experience and clergy effectiveness, and to validate the preliminary research assumption that highly effective pastors through history will reference significant spiritual experiences as contributing to their ministry philosophies, which in turn inform ministry practices and lead then to ministry results that history has acclaimed as *effectiveness*.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to uncover the extent to which select pastors of the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist church, attribute their success, in whole or in part (e.g., their ministry philosophies, and their longevity in ministry) to having had critical spiritual incidents or experiences that occurred prior to or soon after they entered into ministry as their profession.

Theological Foundation

Society is changing, some trends are becoming apparent, but the overall picture has not yet fully developed. William Easum's observations reflect societal changes affecting the church:

These assumptions form the filter through which many of today's most effective pastors sift reality:

- North America is the new mission field.
- Society will become increasingly hostile towards Christianity in the twenty-first century.
- If churches only improve what they have been doing they will die.
- The best way to fail today is to improve yesterday's successes. (13-14)

Easum says Christian pastors will continue to have an important roll to play in this new emerging reality, therefore, discerning the factors that contribute to making pastors effective is equally important. If clergy are going to be effective in leading forward in the postmodern and post-postmodern era, they will need all the theological training and knowledge they can get, and they will need to employ the behaviors and practices that will lead to effectiveness.

Seeking Spiritual Experience—Biblical Examples

Many current writers have observed this paradox: scripture seems to argue that spiritual experiences can intentionally sought and found, and that they are a gift from God. Both the Old and New Testaments are clear that spiritual experiences can be had by seeking the Lord:

His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him-though he is not far from any one of us. (Acts 17:27, NLT)

But from there you will search again for the Lord your God. And if you search for him with all your heart and soul, you will find him. (Deut. 4:29)

And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. (Jer. 29:13, KJV)

And so I say to you: Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you...As bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:9, 13, GNB)

These Scriptures make it clear that God desires that his followers not just believe but also experience God. Scripture makes it clear that spiritual experiences are gifts from God given by the Holy Spirit as the Spirit decides, “It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have” (1 Cor. 12:11, NLT).

The paradoxical principle expressed in Scripture is that spiritual experience is both a freely given gift of God, but it also comes about, at least in part, as a result of our efforts. God has his hand out to us, but we must do our part of reaching up to God. The Bible is uniformly consistent that personal spiritual experiences with God are both possible and to be sought through personal effort and that spiritual experiences are something to be sought by every believer that we should classify as a biblical doctrine, the expectation that every believer will pursue spiritual experiences.

A survey of the Scriptures reveals that there were three main factors used to determine clergy effectiveness in the Scriptures and early Church: the number of converts made, spiritual power as displayed in signs and wonders and presence of the Holy Spirit, and perseverance in carrying out the work. When Paul reported to the church at Antioch on returning from his first missionary journey, the measures of success he described are (1) the large number of converts made, (2) the things God had done through them (i.e. wonders), and (3) the perseverance of the evangelist in traveling and of the new churches. When Paul wrote to the Romans, virtually the same things were reported: (1) success in winning obedience from the Gentiles, (2) signs and wonders, and (3) perseverance in traveling from Jerusalem to Illyricum. The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles both report on the numbers of people at events, so we may take from the fact that report on the numbers that large numbers are taken as evidence of success. For example, the story of Jesus' miracle of feeding the crowd is called the feeding of the *five thousand* and the story of Peter making his appeal to the crowd on Pentecost includes the report that *three thousand* are converted on that day.

Many Scriptural examples point to the concept that vocational passion and ministerial effectiveness are experience-based and that critical spiritual experiences can kindle both new forms of serving and spectacular success at any age. The most important prophet of the Old Testament, Moses, became effective as a prophet at age eighty after a spiritual experience at the burning bush. The prophet Samuel was called into service at a young age through an intense spiritual experience where God spoke to him. In the same way, Jeremiah (1:1-5), Isaiah (6:1-9), and Ezekiel (2:1-5) all received their calls through dramatic spiritual experiences. In the New Testament, we see that the disciples became effective as second-career ministers and evangelists after their intense spiritual experiences observing Jesus during his ministry and as a result of their own Pentecost experience. The call of Peter, John, and James, as told in Luke 5:1-11, is an excellent example. These fishermen hear Jesus teach, receive a miracle from him in the form of a gigantic catch of fish, and they immediately and leave everything to follow Jesus.

Paul speaks to the link between vocational passion and ministerial effectiveness in his second letter to Timothy:

This is why I remind you to fan into flames the spiritual gift God gave you when I laid my hands on you. For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. Do never be ashamed to tell others about our Lord. (2 Tim. 1:6-8a)

This passage speaks to the concept that vocational passion can be deliberately stirred up in a person, that it is not something you are either born with or not. The key verse here in this passage is verse 6, and the key part of the verse—fan into flames—is from the Greek: *anazopureo* translated as *stir up* in the King James Version, as *fan into flames* in the New Living Translation, and as *rekindle* in the New Revised Standard Version. The word *anazopureo* is a compound word with the pretext *ana* denoting intensity, and *zo*—literally

a live thing, that is, an animal, (the stem from which English forms the word *zoo*) and *pur*, literally or figuratively meaning fiery or fire. Certainly the intensity of the word based on its compounds has clearly been lost in the soft King James Version's *stir up* and even the modern New Living Translation's *fan into flames* seems to fall short of the sum total of the compounded Greek terms of intensity, life, and fire. Paul's application of this term *anazopureo* as a directive concerning spiritual gifts denotes both the intensity of his reminder to Timothy and the importance Paul place on passion being vital for effectively sharing the Gospel.

In verse seven Paul tells says that stirring up our passion is a matter of self-discipline. The clear application for pastors today is that the spiritual gifts are something that an individual has the ability to intensify or magnify, and that they have an implied duty or calling to do so. Again, all of these examples from scripture indicate that a pastor's passion and ministerial effectiveness are a matter of personal choice, and are an exercise of personal responsibility, and self-discipline. The idea that Scripture points to the importance, we could even say urgency of vocational passion and that building up ones vocational passion is a matters of choice and self-disciple has huge implications for clergy. I wish the curriculum for my MDiv at Duke had included a class in spiritual development or spiritual growth techniques.

Spiritual Experience Resulting in Success in Serving God

In this famous quote from his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes the first part of his miraculous calling into ministry—a vision of the risen Christ:

He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the

apostles. Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, *I also saw him* [emphasis mine]. (1 Cor. 15:5-8)

In Acts 9:1-18 the rest of the details of Paul's miraculous calling are presented: he heard a voice speaking from Heaven; he was struck blind and remained blind for three days. His sight was miraculously restored, God spoke about him saying, "Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel," confirming in a miraculous way Paul's unique calling.

Perhaps the most striking example anywhere of the dramatic power of spiritual experience to increase vocational passion and ministerial effectiveness was the experience of the disciples at Pentecost. Jesus made a promise to the disciples: "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Act 1:8, GNB). Certainly the disciples were not setting the world on fire for the risen Christ. In fact, by assembling in a locked room, they seemed more like people preoccupied with worry that the fate that Jesus met could soon be theirs than they did apostles and evangelists. But upon receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit, they were apparently changed, truly empowered to go and make disciples (Acts 2:40-41).

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the success of the majority of Biblical heroes is identified as a result of their spiritual experiences and resulting passion for the Lord. In the Old Testament, Moses received his calling in a miraculous experience of God at the burning bush (Exod. 3:1-10). David's confidence in being willing to fight Goliath comes from the fact that he has already experienced God's miraculous saving actions (1 Sam. 17:37). Many psalms give evidence of David's prayer relationship with God being crucial to his success:

But you, O Lord, are a shield around me; you are my glory, the one who holds my head high. I cried out to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy mountain. (Ps. 3:3-4, NLT)

The danger of death was all around me; the waves of destruction rolled over me. The danger of death was around me, and the grave set its trap for me. In my trouble I called to the Lord; I called to my God for help. In his temple he heard my voice; he listened to my cry for help. (Ps. 18:4-6, GNT)

In these passages David prays and God answers. The prophets all received their call and their messages as a result of having spiritual experiences. Jeremiah's calling was a typically dramatic example and certainly well documented in Scripture as God dictated quite an introduction:

The Lord said to me, "I chose you before I gave you life, and before you were born I selected you to be a prophet to the nations." I answered, "Sovereign Lord, I don't know how to speak; I am too young." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say that you are too young, but go to the people I send you to, and tell them everything I command you to say. (Jer. 1:4-7)

In addition to his dramatic calling, Paul also had a continuation of miraculous experience as he received the Holy Spirit and then great spiritual power to perform miracles:

I am acting like a fool—but you have made me do it. You are the ones who ought to show your approval of me. For even if I am nothing, I am in no way inferior to those very special "apostles" of yours. The many miracles and wonders that prove that I am an apostle were performed among you with much patience. (2 Cor. 12:11-12, GNB)

What an incredible blessing Paul received to be able to prove his apostleship through the performance of many miracles.

The apostle John received his revelation while he was in prayer and worship, "It was the Lord's Day, and I was worshiping in the Spirit. Suddenly, I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast" (Rev. 1:10). Clearly the testimony of both Old and New

Testament Scriptures is that spiritual experience is a prerequisite of effectiveness in serving God.

Spiritual Experience in the Post-Apostolic Premodern Era

In his *Confessions* St. Augustine of Hippo writes about his passionate relationship with God. He felt flooded with light (178); he felt his heart “pierced with arrows” of God’s love (182); when he read the Scriptures he felt fire in his heart (188). A survey of the most influential Christian theologians from the apostolic era to the modern era shows a remarkable range in approach to seeking spiritual experience. Immediately after the apostolic era ended, the early Church fathers were rightly focused on defending the faith from persecutors without and heretics within. While many did suffer martyrdom because of their strong faith, they did not write much, if anything, about their personal spiritual experience. Their writings were largely attempts to defend the faith from attackers through intellectual argument as was true for Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Ignatius of Antioch. Nevertheless, they demonstrated great faith by their actions. Ignatius of Antioch was martyred in 107 CE—fed to the lions by the Roman Emperor Trajan. He demonstrated his ministerial effectiveness and faith by writing a series of letters to early Christian churches that are still treasured today. He demonstrated his passion by facing his death with faith: “I am writing to all the churches to let it be known that I will gladly die for God if only you do not stand in my way. Let me be food for the wild beasts, for they are my way to God” (qtd. in Foley). He hinted at the source of his strength to face martyrdom: “My love has been crucified, and no fire in me that loves anything; but living water

springing up in me, and which says to me inwardly, Come to the Father” (Schaff, *Kindle Location 3667*). I would argue that certainly their willingness to accept martyrdom is evidence of their passion, but written evidence concerning what motivated their passionate faith is lacking from the historical record.

By the fourth century, much better evidence emerges that intellectual and scriptural arguments for the reality of God were being supported by the strength of personal spiritual experience. St. Augustine is the best known of many examples of those for whom a direct link exists between their spiritual experiences, their passion for their calling, and their effectiveness in service to God. Writing about his mystical experiences of God Augustine described them in euphoric terms:

I gazed upon you with eyes too feeble to resist the dazzle of your splendor. Your light shown upon me in its brilliance, and I was filled with love and dread alike.... And far off I heard your voice calling, “I am the God who is.” I heard your voice as we hear voices that speak to our hearts, and at once I had no cause to doubt. I might more easily have doubted that I was alive than that truth.” (7.10)

You called; you cried; and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you chased away my blindness. You became fragrant; and I inhaled and sighed for you. I tasted and now hunger for you. You touched me and I burned for your peace. (10.27)

Augustine’s mystical experiences show that the era of extraordinary spiritual incidents didn’t end with the apostles.

St. Jerome, translator of the Vulgate Bible, gave his life to the service of God after having a vision (McManners 227). Over the next few centuries, notable Christian theologians and leaders who promoted experiential relationship with God through their writings include St. Anselm, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Catherine

of Siena. St. Anselm, who is famous for his title for God: *The Being Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Thought*, was also a proponent of experiential faith:

My Lord and my God, my joy and the hope of my heart, tell my soul if this is that joy which you spoke to us about through your son, “Ask and you shall receive that your joy may be full.” For I have found a fullness of joy that is more than full, it is a joy that fills the whole heart, mind, and soul, indeed it fills the whole of a man, and yet, joy beyond measure remains. (255-56)

Anselm’s mystical experiences circa 1060 CE show that the era of extraordinary spiritual incidents continued long after the apostles. One hundred fifty years later, St. Francis of Assisi, who is most famous for his wonderful prayer, “Lord make me an instrument of your peace,” became the first saint known to have the stigmata. St. Francis gave up a military career to become a priest after having a vision (McManners 214). Again, approximately one hundred fifty years later, St. Catherine of Siena received a vision of Christ at age 16 leading her to vow to give her whole life to God as a nun. She received the stigmata at age 23 including a wound in her side when she mystically exchanged her heart with Christ (Stackpole).

St. Thomas of Aquinas, recognized by the Roman Catholic Church as their greatest theologian and philosopher for his *Summa Theologica*, became a priest after his calling was confirmed to him by two angels who appeared to him in a dream. Ironically, after a career of writing and teaching, four months before his death, he experienced a divine revelation which was so powerful that he abandoned completing the *Summa*, saying that it and his other writings “were so much straw in the wind compared to the reality of the divine glory” (“Saint Thomas”). Unfortunately he never described what this revelation was.

The similarity of these major figures in Christian history and theology all having intense spiritual experiences, clearly establishes a pattern that can be seen throughout the history of the church: its most highly effective, passionate leaders and theologians were empowered by having had personal exceptional spiritual experiences. The example of these highly effective leaders of the church being empowered by spiritual experiences argues for valuing spiritual experience as a marker of clergy effectiveness.

Modern Writers' Thoughts

My theology in this area of pastoral passion for the ministry and ministerial effectiveness is primarily shaped by three major factors: my own experiences, which include a series of intense spiritual experiences resulting in my call into ministry; the discipline of reading Scripture daily, which I have carried out for over twenty years; and, by being a student of ministerial effectiveness for the last thirty-one years. I have attended seminars taught by most of the top experts in church growth and Christian leadership, including Herb Miller, John Maxwell, Jim Hybells, Bill Easum, Tom Bandy, Adam Hamilton, Leonard Sweet, Dave Galloway, Robert Schuller, John Ed Mathison, Rick Warren, Christian A. Schwarz, and George Barna. All these authors and lecturers agree that the leadership ability of its pastor is the number one determinant as to whether a church rises or falls, succeeds or fails. They agree that a pastor's passion is a key factor in success in leadership and that at least to some extent passion can be learned. Here are some examples:

Church growth stems from many factors, but none is more important than the pastor. (Miller 113)

That's exactly what we need as Christians if we're going to influence people who are outside the family of God. We must have high potency, which means a strong enough concentration of Christ's influence in our

lives that His power and presence will be undeniable to others. (Hybels and Mittelberg Introduction)

If the ministry of all the people or, as it is sometimes called, the “priesthood of all believers” is ever to become a reality, that ministry must start somewhere. When pastors can begin to be straightforward about our own faith journeys, other people can recognize similar movements of the Spirit in their lives. (Rice 101)

An effective leader in the position of pastor is one who shuns the spotlight when it comes to spiritual growth. The focus of his life is upon becoming a “deeper” Christian, knowing God ever more intimately. (“5 Reasons”)

Clearly many experts agree that the pastor is the key to the success of the church.

Many clerics through history have held a strong belief that passion to serve the Lord is the key to success and that critical spiritual experience(s) can give or increase ones passion for God. St. Ignatius founded his movement and the Jesuit order with a strong core belief in the principle that spiritual experience can be achieved through practice and experience, and that a foundation in spiritual experience is essential to quality Christian service (Foley 4-5). He required all priest candidates for the Jesuit order he founded (and all Jesuit candidates are still required) to complete a thirty-day-long, individual spiritual retreat that features the uses of six different hour-long spiritual exercises every day and daily consultation with a spiritual director. Five times I have gone on individual spiritual retreats using Ignatian spiritual exercises, and I have found these retreats to have been among the most powerful, refreshing, uplifting empowering encouraging times of my life. They have also provided the setting in which I have had several exceptional spiritual experiences.

Wesley was famous for the level of passionate commitment he demanded from his clergy, beginning the Methodist movement as a holy club. Wesley’s theology is especially known for his emphasis on the means of grace (i.e., reading, meditating,

studying the Scriptures, praying, fasting, regularly attending worship and taking the sacraments, doing good works, and sharing in Christian conversation) as access points to experiencing at least a portion of the divine grace of God. Wesley clearly believed a direct link exists between a pastor's vocational passion and therefore his or her ministerial effectiveness. He famously stated, "Give me one hundred pastors who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and such alone will shake up the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on Earth" ("Beliefnet's Inspirational Quotes"). Wesley's journal provides concrete evidence that his own critical spiritual experience as he listened to a sermon at Aldersgate that empowered him (Works 159).

Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King's book, *Experiencing God*, is one of the best-selling Christian books of the last twenty years. In it they say effectiveness in serving God comes from experiencing God, and their *seven realities of experiencing God* they include that a passionate commitment to serving God is a result of experiencing God (62-63). In their understanding, passion for God leads to experiences of God, and then experiences of God lead to more passion for God, which leads to more experiences of God in a positive, upward, reinforcing cycle.

In her wonderful book Ruth Haley Barton writes about the experience of spiritual transformation. Acknowledging both that spiritual experience is vital for ministerial effectiveness and also a gift from God that cannot be demanded or conjured, she writes about the things a Christian can do to bring himself or herself to the place where God can bring about the gift of spiritual transformation. Her book is something of a how-to manual that primarily emphasizes using the traditional means of grace. Her theological foundation for spiritual experience is that one must have several prerequisites that are the

starting point for the journey of coming to the place where God will transform us. She is proud that her work acknowledges the contributions of Eastern religious traditions to the pursuit of spiritual transformation. Some of the prerequisites she lifts up as essential for spiritual transformation are also elements of the Buddhist eightfold path: right thoughts, right intentions, right desires (160-161).

Barton lifts up several elements of the Buddhist eightfold path in a Trinitarian Christian formulation. For example, she lifts up *right thoughts*, which include thinking or trusting that God has our best intentions in mind. She asks why God would intervene in a person's life in a powerful way if that person does not trust in God to have his or her best interests in mind. and why would God answer one's questions if one will not trust his answers. Second, one must trust in Jesus, trust specifically that what Jesus taught is correct concerning the question: "What are the two greatest commandments?" Barton asks why would God intervene in someone's life if they are ignoring or have not bothered to learn what God has already taught through Jesus' words or actions. Third, Barton says, that one must trust that the Holy Spirit is still alive and active in the world and must be open to and desire to be filled with the Holy Spirit (162).

Taking a someone different view, Rick Warren seems to believe that spiritual experience and commitment are not nearly as important as skill:

This is a favorite myth promoted at pastor's conferences, where speakers piously imply that if your church is not growing, the problem is your lack of dedication.... It takes more than dedication to lead a church to grow; it takes skill. (56)

Warren is clearly both dedicated and skilful in church leadership. He lifts up many excellent suggestions for ministry practices in his books that are wonderfully helpful. His writings, his sermons, and his teaching all show that passion for ministry consumes him,

and has since he was a teen. In the same way, John Ed Mathison (now retired) and Adam Hamilton who on the basis of increasing membership were and are arguably the most effective Methodist pastors in the country, are both skillful and passionate about ministry. I have been blessed to speak with both of them personally as I attended conferences in which they were featured speakers, and their words and persona showed that passion for ministry consumes them. Both have written or spoken extensively about ministry practices that lead to success, but in the conferences I attended that they taught I found that neither emphasize spiritual experiences as critical to success.

In this they follow Kennon L. Callahan, author of one of the most widely circulated books on church growth. His book features twelve keys, ten of which could be used by any corporation, including adequate parking, landscaping, and accessibility. He does include two ministry practices as keys— dynamic worship and pastoral visitation, but even here he did not include any kind of dependence on God for success, instead focusing on specific practices that constitute dynamic worship, such as starting and ending on time, and relatable sermon content. (Chaps. 2-3).

Christian Schwarz, the German church growth consultant and creator of the Natural Church Development approach to church healthiness, emphasizes a combination of factors. In his view, eight essential characteristics define a healthy church. His approach is to scientifically measure all eight of those characteristics and then concentrate efforts in the areas where one is weakest, with the expectation that strengthening the *minimum factor* of a church will help raise the over all success rate of the church. Schwarz asks churches to focus on passionate spirituality: “The point separating growing and non-growing churches is: ‘Are the Christians in this church on

fire?'" (26). He also emphasizes more mundane items like warmly greeting visitors.

Andy Stanley, pastor of one of the largest churches in America, teaches seminars on the importance of passion as a driving force for ministry. Certainly the preponderance of contemporary theology supports the thesis that vocational passion flows from spiritual experience and ministerial effectiveness flows from vocational passion.

Seeking Spiritual Experience in the Modern Eras

According to Marshall Berman, an American philosopher and currently Distinguished Professor of Political Science at The City College of New York, modernity is divided into three conventional phases:

- Early modernity 1500-1789, or 1453-1789 in traditional historiography,
- Classical modernity 1789-1900, and
- Late modernity 1900-1989 (16-17).

Modernity is generally thought of in terms of the social movements of Western society from an agrarian economy to an industrial economy, from a prescientific worldview to a scientific worldview, from illiterate to literate, and from monarchies to ideologically based political systems. The modern era also saw the division of Western Christianity with the formation of Protestantism and separation of the Christian church from the dominant political structures of the day. In the previous era, the Middle Ages, the church was closely aligned with the monarchies of the day, both legitimizing the monarchy's right to rule and drawing and using this power for its own purposes. As is the case in our current era, the modern era was birthed in a time of complete social upheaval and change. Multiple waves of new ideas and technologies collided at the same time. Sociologically, the printing press, the growth of the scientific method were power waves of change and

in Christianity there was a dramatic shift from tradition-dominated practice to scripture-dominated practice. Modernity, however, is rightly divided into three phases; as each was somewhat unique in terms of the cultural factors at play, so I will now consider each of them separately.

The Protestant Reformation was the most important and powerful force for social change in the early modernity phase. The schism it caused not only divided Christianity but led to a division in Europe between a primarily Protestant north and a Catholic south, a thirty year war in central Europe, and Protestantism contributed greatly to the establishment of the United States, as many of the early settlers were Protestants who came to America searching for religious freedom. The underlying source of the division was the debate over the question of whether the prime authority for faith and action should be tradition or Scripture. In spite of the division, during the many years of war and persecution and conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism, there remained a shared set of beliefs between them, in both of the importance of growing in personal relationship with God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. This emphasis on seeking to experience relationship with God had several shared points of agreement about spiritual experience:

- It was universally recognized as a gift of God.
- It cannot be bought, or demanded or expected from God.
- Personal effort in using the means of grace can open us to God, leading to

spiritual experience.

Seeking Spiritual Experience in Early Modernity 1500-1789

Martin Luther's Reformation was a major force contributing to the early modern era. He was deeply spiritual: "If I fail to spend two hours in prayer each morning, the

devil gets the victory through the day. I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer” (qtd. in Bounds 51-52). Luther and John Calvin, together with Catholic contemporaries St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Teresa of Ávila, St. John of the Cross, and St. Francis de Sales, all fall into the early modern phase of the modern era. All of these were also known to have experiential relationships with God that apparently empowered their influence and effectiveness. John Wesley’s influence falls into both the phases of early modernity and of classical modernity. Because the effects of his work were felt in America in the largest part after his death in 1791, I will mention his contributions to the discussion in the next section.

Martin Luther’s Reformation established a three-legged stool on which Protestant Christian practice rests: (1) *sola scriptura*—the belief that the Bible contains all a person needs to know to have salvation and holiness; (2) *the priesthood of believers*—the doctrine that each Christian has equal access to God and each is called to minister for God to others also called for a return to prayer and to experiential personal relationship with God; and, (3) *salvation by grace through faith*—the belief that faith in Christ gives the Christian forgiveness for sins, access to God’s grace, and admission to heaven. These three legs are the main characteristics today’s mainline Protestant denominations still have in common. The thing that I want to emphasize here is that the glue that held Luther’s three-legged stool together was his emphasis on seeking God through personal effort, and that he promoted this approach as a tenet for all Christians: “As is the business of tailors to make clothes and cobblers to make shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray” (“Prayer and Intercession”), and “all who call on God in true faith, earnestly from the heart, will certainly be heard, and will receive what they have asked and desired”

(“Martin Luther’s Small Catechism”). The experience of praying and believing that one has been heard and responded to is a powerful or critical spiritual experience.

A Catholic contemporary of Luther, St. John of the Cross expressed similar sentiments:

The spirit feels itself here to be deeply and passionately in love, for this spiritual enkindling produces the passion of love. And, inasmuch as this love is infused, it is passive rather than active, and thus it begets in the soul a strong passion of love. This love has in it something of union with God, and thus to some degree partakes of its properties, which are actions of God rather than of the soul, these being subdued within it passively. (134-35)

St. John’s writings describe the commitment to an experiential, as opposed to an intellectual faith.

Another Catholic contemporary of John Calvin, St. Ignatius of Loyola (who founded the Jesuit order), is an excellent example of the power of spiritual experiences to change a person and make him or her effective in serving God. Ignatius had been a Spanish knight; he fought in a number of battles and killed a number of people both in combat and out. He lost a leg to a cannon shot in a battle, and during his recuperation he had a vision of Mary and the infant Jesus, and he had several other dramatic visions as well. When he was able to get around again he retreated to a cave where stayed for several months, praying seven hours a day and writing his book *The Spiritual Exercises*:

By the name of Spiritual Exercises is meant every way of examining one’s conscience, of meditating, of contemplating, of praying vocally and mentally, and of performing other spiritual actions,... every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies and after it is rid, to seek and find the Divine Will. (Fleming 4)

His order was centered around an emphasis on growing in personal relationship with God through personal effort. One of Ignatius’ spiritual exercises is a guided *five senses*

descent into hell, in which the participant is guided to experience mentally for one hour what he or she would be experiencing through each of the five senses should one be placed in hell. All of Ignatius' exercises were aimed at increasing the movement of the Holy Spirit within the participants.

Interestingly, Calvin, born in 1509, was a classmate of Ignatius at the University of Paris. During this time Calvin had a sudden conversion experience. It is not described in detail in anything he wrote; however, the result was that he also seemed to favor experience-based faith:

To prayer, then, are we indebted for penetrating to those riches which are treasured up for us with our heavenly Father? For a kind of intercourse between God and men, by which, having entered the upper sanctuary, the appear before Him and appeal to his promises, that when necessity requires, they may learn *by experiences* [emphasis mine] that what they believed merely on the authority of his word was not in vain. Hence that dread and amazement with which as Scripture uniformly relates holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God. Men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance until they have. (Calvin 2)

Calvin's conception apparently is that we do not have the deepest levels of faith without personal experience of God.

Saint Alphonsus De Liguori was an Italian Catholic bishop, spiritual writer, composer, scholastic philosopher, and theologian. A brilliant young man, he graduated with twin doctorates at age 16. He became a priest at age 30 after first following his father's desires that he become a lawyer, and he went on to author seven books of theology and to found the religious order the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (the Redemptorists). In his book *The Way of Salvation and Perfection* he wrote about how personal effort leads to the result of spiritual experience:

We must obtain from God, by prayer, the graces that are necessary in order to enable us to advance in the way. Almighty God, ordinarily speaking, does not give grace to any but those who pray, in order to obtain *graces of special value*, it is not enough simply to pray; *we must pray urgently*. (emphasis mine; 217)

He does not write about his own experience, but one may infer from this statement above that he was experienced in the obtaining of *graces of special value* through urgent prayer. Other notables of church history from this era who are also well-known for their experienced-based spirituality include St. John of Avila, St. Francis de Sales, St. Thomas, and St. Teresa of Avila.

Seeking Spiritual Experience in Classic Modernity 1789-1900

This era is known in the secular world for the dominating effects of the industrial revolution and resulting mass production on culture and society. In the Christian church, this era is known for the rise and spread of biblical criticism and for the continuation of the weakening of the church through the separation of the church from power of the state. The Christian church in America reflected the trends of society, in appearance and organizational structure. As America in this era became a world leader in mass production the mainline churches in America reflected the cultural trend of mass production, in outward appearance and inward structure. America was rapidly expanding during this time frame and wherever towns were established, on virtually every main street in every rural community a church was constructed with remarkable uniformity. Today in rural communities throughout the east coast from Maine to Florida and through the entire midwest mainstreets generally still feature a white, wooden, rectangular church building with a steeple and bell tower over the front door and rows of wooden pews inside that was constructed in this era. At this same time the denominations were also

structuring their organizations using a business model, codifying their beliefs and practices to make them uniform for their churches, the *Book of Discipline* for the Methodists, the *Book of Common Worship* for the Presbyterians, the *Book of Common Prayer* for the Episcopalians.

Spiritual experience is inherently personal and individual; such personalization seems to go in the opposite direction of the uniformity of mass production. Perhaps it was the societal trend of the uniformity of mass production and the uniformity of structure, but whatever the cause, theology of the classic era of modernity emphasized intellectual knowledge about God and common worship. This movement away from emphasizing experiential or *heart faith* and towards intellectual Christianity or *head faith* was driven in part by German biblical scholars of the Tübingen School. These scholars and others around the world who followed their lead popularized the scientific study of the Bible known as higher criticism and its children: source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, tradition criticism, canonical criticism, and historical criticism. Biblical criticism, as these scholars thought of it, was not an effort to destroy the Christian faith but rather to *demythologize* it. They saw demythologizing as refining the faith—separating the gold from the ore. However, by calling into question the historical accuracy of any part of Scripture, biblical criticism was a destructive force to the faith of many Christians who did not have the benefit of a deep and broad theological education as these scholars did.

One of the most famous of the early pioneers of higher criticism was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). His work is considered foundational to modern biblical hermeneutics. Because of his profound effect on subsequent Christian thought, he is often

called *the father of modern liberal theology*. Followers of this school of thought began demythologizing the Bible and looking for the *historical Jesus* (i.e., Jesus separated from any miracle or anything not immediately explainable by science). Ironically, Schleiermacher himself looked to individual spiritual experience to close any gap created between faith and demythologization. Kenneth Scott Latourette writes, “His theology was based upon what he called *Gefuhl*, roughly translated as *feeling* perhaps better for my purposes, as *religious experience* [emphasis mine] (1121). In his work, Schleiermacher writes: “The sum total of religion is to feel that in its highest unity, all that moves us in feeling is one, to feel, that is to say, that our being and living is a being and living in and through God” (49-50). The early pioneers of higher criticism were in general well-intentioned Christians seeking an intellectual approach to their faith.

I was surprised to discover that Wesley’s position on spiritual experience shifted somewhat during his lifetime. According to his biographer Richard P. Heitzenrater, before his Aldersgate experience, Wesley’s assumption was that spiritual experience was not relevant:

“He was still working on the assumption that his assurance of salvation (knowing he was a Christian) was a sort of intellectual confidence that depended upon holding a correct set of beliefs, grounded upon the appropriately ranked authorities, (scripture, tradition, reason) and resulting in a proper set of actions.” (93)

After his own experience at Aldersgate, he and his brother Charles began preaching that unless a person had experienced the spiritual gift of assurance he or she was not truly a Christian. Heitzenrater quotes Wesley from a letter written to a friend, Melvin Horne, in 1775: “When 50 years ago my brother Charles and I, in simplicity of our hearts, told the good people of England that unless they *knew* [emphasis mine] their sins were forgiven

they were under the wrath and curse of God, I marvel Melville, they did not stone us!”

97). Wesley shifted his theology on a number of points over his lifetime, but he was a lifelong proponent of the inclusion of reason as a major component of spiritual discernment concerning the rules of faith and practice: “Let reason do all that reason can: Employ it as far as it will go. By reason we learn what is that new birth, without which we cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven...” (“The Case of Reason”). Wesley was also indubitably influenced in his early view by his father’s constant reminder: “The inward witness son, the inward witness—this is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity.” (Harrison 15).

Wesley wrote that he had dabbled with Mysticism for a time:

I grew acquainted with the mystic writers, whose noble descriptions of union with God and internal religion made everything else appear mean, flat and insipid. The form ran thus, Love is all; all the commands besides are only a means of love. You must choose those you feel are a means to you and use them as long as they are so. (Heitzenrater 95.6)

Wesley was greatly troubled at the uncertainty that letting love be one’s guide, as a rule for guiding faith and practice created in himself. He wrote that when he for a time embraced the mystic philosophy of love being the guide for faith and practice, he was “continually doubting whether I was right or wrong, and never out of perplexities and entanglements” (95.6). In the end Wesley rejected mysticism as a dangerous enemy of Christianity. He rejected the need for spiritual experience in the form of the gift of assurance, and he returned to his starting premise that assurance of salvation is a sort of intellectual confidence that depends upon holding a correct set of beliefs, grounded upon the appropriately ranked authorities (i.e., Scripture, tradition, reason), and expressing itself in Christian actions.

Wesley's turn away from emphasizing spiritual experience as he aged seems ironic because without Wesley's personal spiritual experience at Aldersgate Wesley would have dwelled in obscurity, just one more forgotten eighteenth-century professor at Oxford. On the strength of his own spiritual experience Wesley went on to found a world-wide denomination and to become a best-selling author. His sermons are clear evidence that Wesley loved intellectual arguments for faith, but in my opinion, he should have listened to his father: The inward witness *is* the strongest proof of the Christian faith.

These comments are in no way intended to diminish the amazing accomplishments of Wesley who is arguably the most influential theologian of this phase of modernity. Together with George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, Wesley sparked a revival of interest in personal holiness and relationship with God through personal effort called the Great Awakening, which swept Europe and America. The leaders of the Great Awakening sought a strong emotional response to faith from their congregations. The emphasis of the revival was on "outpourings of the Holy Spirit, and on converted sinners *experiencing Gods love personally*" [emphasis mine] (Kidd 36). Wesley was accurately described as Heitzenrater named him: *elusive* in the sense that while he embraced and then abandoned the importance of the individual spiritual experience of assurance, he never abandoned his emphasis on the individual seeking sanctification through the means of grace, which all can involve some level of experience of God.

The modern era and particularly the classic modern phase is synonymous with rationalism (i.e., if anything is not rational, logical and scientifically verifiable it is rejected as false). Outside the church, scholars Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Gotthold

Lessing (1729-81), and G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) touted rationalism and attacked belief in miracles and in the inspired nature of Scripture. Inside the church, theologians Johann Salomo Semler (1725-91), Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1827), Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860), and Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) all questioned or attacked the reality of miracles, the divine inspiration of Scripture, and the human ability to experience God. During this phase of modernism, personal holiness for believers attending mainline churches was increasingly expressed in social justice ministries and in Bible study, and in the intellectual understanding of Scripture. Idealism, existentialism, the social gospel, and liberation theology all grew from this branch (Driskill 24).

In general it is true that the major theologians of this era of modernity and therefore, mainstream Christian thought moved away from placing a primary emphasis on experiential religion toward theological explanation and argument-based religion.

Seeking Spiritual Experience In Late Modernity 1900-1989

One of the most influential of the antireligious philosophers, of the modern era was Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900). He is perhaps most famous for his statement, "God is dead." Nietzsche believed that developments in science together with the increasing secularization of European society had, in effect, killed the traditional basis for Christian faith (Salberg, Stewart, Weiss and Wesley). Sigmund Freud, a contemporary of his, "regarded God as illusion, based on the infantile need or a powerful father figure" that could be put aside in favor of reason and science" (Armstrong 357).

Unfortunately, the theological response to this philosophical attack against Christianity was weak, and the antireligion movement begun in this era remains quite

popular and has grown quite destructive. The experience of Albert Einstein gives one small example of what was happening to people then and still is today:

I came-though the child of entirely irreligious (Jewish) parents-to a deep religiousness, which, however, reached an abrupt end at the age of twelve. Through the reading of popular scientific books I soon reached the conviction that much in the stories of the Bible could not be true. The consequence was a positively fanatic orgy of freethinking coupled with the impression that youth is intentionally being deceived by the state through lies; it was a crushing impression. Mistrust of every kind of authority grew out of this experience, a skeptical attitude toward the convictions that were alive in any specific social environment—an attitude that has never again left me, even though, later on, it has been tempered by a better insight into the causal connections. (qtd. in Clark 17)

What an indictment of the demythologizing movement it is that it contributed to the destruction of Einstein's faith as a boy. His words, "tempered by a better insight into the causal connections," reflected the reality that as an adult Einstein came to believe in a living transcendent God who was *in* and *through* all things and *is* all things in creation:

I'm not an atheist and I don't think I can call myself a pantheist. We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It does not know how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangements of the books, but doesn't know what it is. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God. (qtd. in Deem)

Einstein went from belief in the Judeo-Christian God to deconstruction to awareness of the reality of a superintelligence behind the creation and laws of the universe. His observation of nature told him that the laws of nature are too perfect to disallow a creator. Unfortunately, Einstein never came to know God as a personal God who is also *over* all things, and he said it was his one regret in life was that he never spend more time looking into the force and intelligence that his work in physics led him to believe created, and gave order to the universe.

The theological response to the *God-is-dead* movement of the first half of the late modern era was dominated by committed Christians who were well intentioned but whose works that centered around demythologizing the New Testament had the opposite effect of what they were hoping. By demythologizing the New Testament, they were hoping to provide the church with lasting truths that could withstand the critical methods of the Tübingen school, and from secular rationalism. The dominant theologians of the day were Adolf von Harnack, Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann. Adolf von Harnack (1865-1923), was the foremost German proponent of liberal theology, and one of the most widely read theologians of his time. Harnack used the historical-critical method to extract what he called the *timeless kernel* of essential Christianity from the *husk* of Church history (Michaud). Schweitzer hoped to do very much the same thing with his book, but by the time he completed his important work, which really represented the crescendo of liberalism, he began to doubt his methods:

And yet the time of doubt was bound to come. We modern theologians are too proud of our historical method, too proud of our [demythologized] historical Jesus, too confident in our belief in the spiritual gains which our historical theology can bring to the world. We thought that we could build up by the increase of historical knowledge a new and vigorous Christianity and set free new spiritual forces. (398)

Instead of creating a more vigorous Christianity Schweitzer recognized that the work of himself and other well intentioned theologians, instead may have been, “thrusting ourselves between men and the gospels,” and offering them, “a Jesus who was too small, because we had forced Him into conformity with our human standards and human psychology” (398).

Bultmann embraced the validity of demythologizing the New Testament. He had faith in Christ but little faith in the stories of the life of Jesus. He was confident in the

reality of Jesus as the son of God, he was not confident in the historical accuracy of the reporting on Jesus' miracles. He famously said, "All that matters is the 'thatness' not the 'whatness' of Jesus" (qtd. in Broadhead 1170-71). To Bultmann the miracles of Jesus did not matter but the message did.

Theological liberalism saw itself as a respectable way to free Christianity from a primitive Hebrew cosmology, "to which no intelligent person could assent" while still preserving its values and ethics (Rose). The collective works of these gentlemen were so comprehensive, and complex that while they personally were able demythologize the New Testament and yet remain committed Christians their approach never penetrated into mainstream churches. The mainstream of Christianity was not interested in being liberated from its uninformed beliefs. The intellectual arguments of theologians who argued for the importance of Christ while at the same time declaring the gospels which tell about him to be largely mythological did not gain a widespread audience.

Ironically as the demythologizing liberal theology of the classic modern era was reaching its apex of influence, Christian influence in America reached its high water mark with the success of the temperance movement, that capped a 150-year struggle and resulted in a constitutional amendment in 1918 to prohibit the drinking of alcohol nationwide. The repeal of prohibition in 1933 was widely perceived, in terms of public opinion in America, as a huge defeat for Christianity.

The most influential theologians of the era included Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich; they began developing and sharing their conceptions which became known as neoorthodoxy. Neoorthodoxy was a reaction to and a rejection of both biblical inerrancy and liberal theology. It featured a return to placing importance

on the creeds and orthodox Protestant theology and left unaddressed the concerns of the demythologizers. Barth argued that in Christ God was revealing himself, the intelligible form through which all things were made (Meister and Stump 449). In this respect his theology followed along with the emphasis on reason and intellect above experience that has been increasingly the norm throughout the entire scope of modernity.

In a scathing criticism, Matthew Rose takes on Barth's neoorthodoxy:

Karl Barth was the greatest theologian since the Reformation, and his work is today a dead letter. This is an extraordinary irony. Barth aspired to free Christian theology from restrictive modern habits of mind but in the end preserved the most damaging assumptions of the ideas he sought to overcome.

Rose is saying is that Barth and neoorthodox theology did not challenge the demythologizing of liberalism and of the biblical criticisms; instead, they largely ignored biblical criticism and the demythologizing of the New Testament, dismissing them as not important compared to the apostolic proclamation of salvation through Jesus Christ as expressed in the creeds and other parts of orthodox Protestant theology.

Neoorthodoxy holds the position that God cannot be known through human reason or experience, but God can be known only through the Christ revealed in scripture. Reinhold Niebuhr demonstrates the strength and weakness of neoorthodoxy in his widely acclaimed book. The strength of his work was his exceptional analysis of the human condition—what makes a human being human. The weakness of his work is that while he acknowledges the findings of modern science and higher criticisms of the Bible, he starts with the presumption that mankind is fallen, which he affirms over and over without once addressing the reality that modern science and higher criticism both

consider the fall a myth. Neoorthodoxy offered neither a compelling rational argument for belief nor an appeal to knowing God through personal experience.

Princeton Professor of Theology Seward Hiltner expressed the views of the the extremely liberal movement in modern era thought. He writes, “People come closest to God when they come closest to following their ethical conscience” (122). His view was that once all of the mythology surrounding the life of Jesus is stripped away, such as his miracles, what is left with is Jesus as a wonderful moral teacher.

In general the major theologians of the late modern era promoted a nonexperiential approach to God through Scripture, knowledge of the creeds and dogma of the church, and the understanding of the reality and importance of Jesus Christ or through intellectual appreciation for the teachings and example of Christ. The chief measurements of clergy success in this era were all numerical: number of people baptized, in attendance, the size of the membership, and the amounts given.

The late modernity era also saw the emergence of a new movement, which I would categorize as a grassroots, bottom-up, *back-to-experience* movement. As the influence and power of the Christian church in America continued to be diminished in the 1960s-80s by a host of sociological factors, such as Supreme Court decisions on prayer in school, abortion, and by divisions in the church caused by the Vietnam War, large numbers of Christians began to leave mainline churches and move towards churches that practice more experientially based worship. The *back-to-experience* movement began in earnest with the Holiness movement in Wesleyan tradition, as did the Pentecostal movement, which began in 1900 with the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles. These movements spawned the Church of the Nazarene, the Wesleyan Church, and the Free

Methodist Church, on the Wesleyan side, and the Charismatic movement on the Pentecostal side. Today these denominations together represent the largest segment of Protestantism (“Lasting Impact”).

The *back-to-experience* movement was a renewal movement within the church that emphasized direct personal and emotional experience of God through worship and other efforts to be *spirit-filled* Christians. Within mainline denominations this movement has resulted in a new emphasis on the power of Holy Spirit, resulting in acceptance and popularity of healing services, for example an order of worship for a healing service can be found in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (615-22). Spiritual gifts testing has become a widespread accepted technique to help churches discern who should be in which leadership positions.

In light of his famous deconstruction of the Gospels, Albert Schweitzer became a very surprising, early contributor to the *back-to-experience* movement:

The abiding and eternal in Jesus is absolutely independent of historical knowledge and can only be understood by contact with His Spirit which is still at work in the world. *In proportion as we have the Spirit of Jesus we have true knowledge of Jesus.* (emphasis mine; 399)

Contact with His Spirit is another way of saying *personal experience with God*. Another influential, early, *back-to-experience* theologian of this time was Walter Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch was a proponent of what he named the social gospel. His take on the church’s need to emphasize personal experience sought to combine theology with science:

The social gospel registers the fact that for the first time in history the spirit of Christianity has a chance to form a working partnership with real social and psychological science.

The social gospel creates a type of religious experience corresponding closely to the prophetic type. It fuses the Christian spirit and the social consciousness in a new out-reaching toward God and in remarkable experiences of his comfort and inspiring power. (5, 21)

Rauschenbusch blamed the loss of emphasis on personal spiritual experience in the church on the corruption of church leaders jealous to maintain their power.

Another influential member of the *back-to-experience* theologians of the late modern era was Thomas Merton (born 1915), a Roman Catholic Trappist monk who authored seventy books. In his book *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, Merton writes about the meaning of spiritual direction:

It is a continuous process of formation and guidance, in which a Christian is led and encouraged in his special vocation, so that by faithful correspondence to the graces of the Holy Spirit he may attain to the particular end of his vocation and to union with God. This union with God signifies not only the vision of God in heaven but, as Cassian specifies, that perfect purity of heart which, even on earth, constitutes sanctity and attains to an obscure experience of heavenly things. (76-79)

Merton uses experiential language: correspondence to the graces of the Holy Spirit and union with God.

During the last thirty years of late modernity (1959-89), mainline denominations began to see continual declines in membership, stewardship and attendance. The United Methodist Church for example, which formed in 1968 out of the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church with sixteen million members, experienced continual decline from its formation, and by 2014 had shrunk to less than half its original size (i.e., 7.7 million United Methodists). At the same time, a key trend that began in late modernity and that has continued and been accelerating in postmodernity, is the movement of Christians from mainline into nondenominational churches. According to the Lilly Foundation, in 2012 an estimated 4 percent of the U.S. population (some

12,200,000 people) worshipped in an independent or nondenominational church. This increase represents a growth of more than 50 percent from the 2008 estimate of eight million (“Nondenominational Church Attendance”). This trend is being driven in part by people searching for *authentic Christianity*, by which they mean: religion in which the experience of God is expected. In the late modern era personal spiritual experience was making a comeback but was, and still remains, pretty much a fringe activity for the bulk of mainline attendees.

Spiritual Experience in the Postmodern Era

President Obama famously said, in 2006, “Whatever we once were, we are no longer a Christian nation – at least, not just” (Jackson). While conservative Christians such as myself were critical of Obama’s implied support of that reality, the reality of that statement cannot be argued. That America is no longer a Christian nation is evidence that postmodernism has arrived. Postmodernism is both a title for the current era, and a philosophy. As a philosophy, postmodernism continues the attacks on the foundations of Christian faith that began in the modern era but in a completely new way, in late modernism the focus of theology was on demythologization of Scripture, while still accepting the reality and importance of Christ. The primary philosophy of postmodernism can be boiled down to a single sentence: *There is no such thing as Truth*. Since Christ said, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6), postmodernism can be seen as an attack on the metanarrative of religion itself, and it is being embraced by determined atheists who hate all religion in general and evangelical Christianity in particular (“Postmodernism”). Modernity criticized religion on the basis of logic and reason, and promoted carrying out a scientific analysis of every biblical story and doctrine, trying, to

parse out the true historical Jesus from the allegorical narrative. Postmodernism criticizes religion's claim to having truth.

As a philosophy postmodernism is a simplistic and pessimistic approach to reality that says absolute truth does not exist, and that everything is subjective. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) is largely credited as being the founding father of postmodern philosophy. Nietzsche asserts that truth is simply an illusion:

a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are. (qtd. in Salberg, Stewart, Weiss and Wesley)

Nietzsche and others of his era saw the Christian religion as completely false, a collection of illusions; so postmodernism goes beyond attacking the truth of Christianity, it attacks all truth.

Postmodernism as a philosophy is about deconstruction of, or the actual dissolution of, the social and cultural forms and norms associated with modernity, that science or the scientific approach, or religion can discover, or uncover, or know truth (Salberg, Stewart, Weiss and Wesley). The *deconstructive* approach applied to religion consists of an analysis of a text or subject for the purpose of entirely questioning its presuppositions about the existence of God. Denying the reality of God then takes away the foundation for most of morality, ideology, and values. The prejudice of postmodernism is that nothing can be proven scientifically because every research is carried out by subjective persons who cannot help influencing the results, so every proof is invalid. A person who holds the postmodern philosophy is difficult to debate because

you cannot prove anything to them scientifically related to history culture, science or religion, because postmodernists reject the notion that science can be objective.

The label *postmodernism* identifies what society no longer is (modern), but it does not go further to say what society *is*. Describing the current era by what it is not is a good metaphor for the extent to which Western society is in flux. A number of cultural tsunamis are now crashing down on society and the church, and no one yet knows what will emerge when the waters recede or calm. I am referring here culturally to the dramatic shifting over a short period of time in the societal values concerning sex and sexuality and to the dramatic changes still being issued in by the information/computer revolution. The postmodern era has seen the explosion of personal computing, with 26 million Americans having Internet access in 1989, and 75 percent of Americans, or roughly ten times that number, having Internet access by 2004, and 84 percent of American adults today use the Internet, although up to 20 percent do not use that access (Perrin and Duggan). The full effects of this detonation have not yet been felt; the shock waves are still moving outward.

Post-Postmodernism and Clergy Effectiveness

In the history of Christian religion, the essential question always concerns what the basis of authority is for determining the doctrine and practice of the church (Tickle 145). In the early Church, the authority was the teachings of Christ and the apostles. After the apostolic era and until the Reformation, authority resided in the tradition and organizational structure of the church. With the Reformation the authority shifted Scripture and remained so through the modern eras in spite of biblical criticisms and rationalism. In the early modern era, Scripture was the still the authority for the

governmental power structures of society. Scripture became less and less the authority throughout the modern eras as religion was increasingly separated from government. President Obama's statement that America is no longer a Christian nation reflects the current reality that the divorce is complete.

In the postmodern era, and some would argue we are now in a post-postmodern era, for the Millennial generation and beyond, Scripture as authority is a dead letter. What will replace Scripture and the underlying principle of belief in God as the basis for authority for moral values, faith, and practice, is still being determined, but in a portent of things to come, what is emerging for the individuals of this age group is an emphasis on feeling-based morality: *If it feels good for you then it is good, and if it feels bad for you then don't do it*. Ironically this is close to the motto of Wicca: "The basic code of life-serving action is expressed in the Wiccan Rede as 'An it harm none, do what you will'" (Dragonson). The result of impact of the various waves of turmoil and change of postmodernism have hit the Millennial generation—the first true computer generation—the hardest. Daniel Burke reports a precipitous drop in the number of Americans identifying as Christians in the last eight years, from seventy-eight percent of the population in 2007 to seventy percent in 2014. This drop is mainly because the Millennial generation are leaving the church in huge numbers ("Millenials"). According to Burke, "more than one-third of Millennials now say they are unaffiliated with any faith; that is up ten percentage points since 2007" ("Big Churches"). Unfortunately, older generation worshippers are not being replaced by younger worshippers.

For the longer term, to get a clearer picture of what the church will be like in the late twenty-first century and beyond, the following questions will need to be addressed:

- Based on the challenges already posed by the current realities, and projecting these trends outwards, what pressing needs will clergy be required to meet?
- Projecting forward, concerning the trends of the current reality and the needs will clergy be addressing, what will be effectiveness for clergy look like? and,
- How will clergy in the future lead Christian spirituality to be practiced?

In making predictions for the future the best plan is to learn as much as we can from the past, and we need to look at the current trends and indicators. In 1983 I completed a research project for a sociology independent study course for Stony Brook University while living in Hong Kong. The research project sought to predict what would happen to Hong Kong in 1997 when the British one hundred year lease with China expired. I predicted with 100 percent accuracy the four key elements that would happen: (1) that China would make Hong Kong a special economic zone allowing unfettered capitalism, (2) that they would commit to a fifty-year guarantee of the special economic status to reassure foreign investors, (3) that they would allow democracy in local elections while retaining autonomy over the region, and (4) that they would isolate Hong Kong surrounding it with a fifty-mile buffer zone to protect the mainland from the contagion of democracy and capitalism.

In making these predictions my technique was to look at the past one hundred years for trends and to look at the current trends and indicators. Being able to look back on two-thousand years of history is a definite benefit to making predictions about the future of the church. When the history of the interactions between church and society over the last five hundred years are compared with current trends, some patterns and parallels become immediately apparent. The emergence of the modern era was brought

about by the impact of the printing press, by industrialization, and by mass production. In fact, the modern era is sometimes labeled the industrial age. In the same the way, the postmodern era is marked by its technology of manufacturing: computers, massive access to information through the Internet, and robots. Some have labeled this era *the information age* and others *the computer age*.

According to futurists, the hallmarks of the information age are

- Twenty-four-hour immediate access to information, goods, and services;
- Customization and individualized/personalized service in education, entertainment, and consumer goods;
- Telecommuting, increasing isolation, and virtual friendships;
- Increasing sophistication of and access to technology;
- Expectation of/demand for perfection and rejection of goods;
- Diversity and the empowerment of minorities;
- Emphasis on seeking meaning and balance in life;
- Changes in manufacturing leading to a majority robotic workforce; and,
- A demand for authenticity (Ray).

Each of these points will effect Christian faith and practice in some way. A brief look at how they will impact Christianity and clergy effectiveness follows.

Immediate Access to Information, Goods, and Services

At the present time computers and the Internet provide twenty-four-hour access to information. Twenty-four-hour pharmacies are leading the trend in providing constant access and Amazon is working to cut delivery time on their products down to mere hours through the use of computers, robots, and drones. Obviously, Christians already have

twenty-four-hour access to God and to the Bible; however, the other goods and services the church provides are not available twenty-four hours a day. Podcasting is now making watching worship services constantly accessible. Twitter, Facebook, and other social media make people accessible twenty-four hours a day in ways that are less obtrusive than telephone calls. I already offer my congregation access to accountability groups and Bible study group meetings by Skype, prayer offered by Twitter, and comments to sermons being sent by Snapchat. All these new technologies require pastors to have a new set of skills.

Customization and Individualized/Personalized Service in Education, Entertainment, and Consumer Goods

The biggest information product in the world—Wikipedia—is a great example of the customized individualized trend in this case in information. Anyone can add a topic to Wikipedia based on their personal area of interest or expertise, and if one is looking for information on something and cannot find it one can submit a request (Mason). Web sites such as Amazon track their customer's purchases and suggest books and other items they might be interested in based on their recent shopping history. Facebook tailors the ads seen on an individual's page to the interests that person has. Shopping malls are working on ways to recognize individual consumers and customize the ads the individual sees as they walk along in the mall (Swartz). Pastors are already trained that people have difference preferences in worshipping God: Some are fed most by liturgy, others by the sermon, others by the music; some like to worship in a congregation; some like to be alone in prayer; some prefer to be out in nature. This trend indicates that clergy will need to be aware of and also proficient in multiple approaches to God and spiritual experience.

Telecommuting, Increasing Isolation, and Virtual Friendships

As society emphasizes the individual, and customization of everything, a resultant fracturing of congregations into smaller groups is likely to occur—individualized worship groups who all prefer exclusively a certain approach to God, such as Gregorian chanting or Christian meditation. Conceivably denominational authorities may begin appointing clergy to serve or recruited to serve specialized communities or populations. Virtual communities could become commonplace as three-dimensional holographic visual technology becomes more developed and prevalent, allowing the feeling of communal worship in the privacy of one's own home. In this case, clergy effectiveness will be measured in the number of virtual followers one has.

Increasing Sophistication of and Access to Technology

Worship spaces have, as a general rule, reflected the level of wealth and sophistication of the leading or average worshippers in that area. As society becomes increasingly sophisticated technologically, the expectations placed on the church to keep up technologically will increase. The trend towards technological sophistication is already visible in megachurches that employ light shows, huge screens in the worship spaces and TV screens around the campus. Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City runs flat screen TVs in their gigantic lobby that feature live twitter feeds about the church. The pastor gives his sermons with an iPad in his hand connected by blue tooth to the large screens in the worship space that he uses to illustrate the sermon with photos and drawings and slides. One measure of clergy effectiveness in the future may be the level of technological sophistication they have.

Expectation of and Demand for Perfection and Rejection of Good

A popular folk wisdom saying, “Perfect is the enemy of good enough,” is a reminder that sometimes people have such an expectation of perfection (which may never be attained) that they miss the good enough they could have had; thus, they wind up with nothing. In popular religion all of the emphasis on technology and instant access to information, goods and services creates an expectation of perfection in the services offered. I have heard from members of my Staff Parish Relations Committee, who have asked if I could do my sermons more like Joel Osteen. I am certain that I am not the only pastor who has heard that comment. The average pastor, unlike Osteen, has other responsibilities than to spend thirty hours preparing and delivering one message each week and does not have a research staff or a production staff to help.

The church I currently serve, Oakhurst United Methodist, has an average attendance of three hundred over the last five years but I have too many times heard people with young children telling me that they decided to go to the megachurch just down the road because they provide better opportunities for their children. I know from speaking with other pastors in my annual conference that they are hearing the same kind of things in their churches. The current trends indicate that unless some kind of dramatic increase in clergy effectiveness miraculously occurs, the big churches will continue to get bigger and the small churches will continue to get smaller and die. Clergy effectiveness in the *megachurch era* may become serving as a staff member in a large church and finding and serving a niche group and providing specialized service to that niche group. According to their Web site, the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City has fifteen clergy on staff, each with a specific niche.

Diversity and the Empowerment of Minorities

Diversity means more than racial diversity, and minorities means more than ethnicity. While the whole world is becoming more connected to the World Wide Web, the access to information allows for the fracturing of society into like-minded groups of individuals who like certain activities or philosophies. Minorities, and by that I mean small groups of like-minded or similar individuals, can get their message out to the entire world; information is power. One minority group is extremely destructive to Christianity: With access to the Internet, atheists keep up a steady drum beat of attacks against Christianity. Obviously the group hardest hit by an Internet-driven propaganda campaign would be the group who most use the Internet, and that is the Millennial generation, who grew up never not having a computer in their household and who get the majority of their news from social media. Atheists are extremely active in promoting anti-Christian rhetoric in social media.

According to statistics released by Facebook, the number of Facebook users passed the one-billion mark in 2012 and currently stands at 1.71 billion users (“Number”). My experience as a Facebook subscriber is that I am barraged with an almost daily assault against Christian values in general and Christian religion in particular. I have observed on my Facebook page that an organization called Beyond ALL Religion places posts with an attractive woman’s image and quotes such as: “Most religions are based on a bedrock of LIES! Christianity, Mormonism, Judaism, Islam” (“RELIGION”). I have observed on my Facebook page how popular culture is used to blast religion: John Lennon’s *Imagine No Religion* is printed above an image of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. Images of nuns and Catholic clerics

feature written references to sex scandals involving priests and include sentiments such as: “Religious people—Once we admired you respected you, even envied you. Now we just feel sympathy for you. We’ve moved on, but you haven’t. Sorry.” The posts are placed anonymously and then reposted on individual Facebook pages. Facebook tells on the bottom of these posts the number of times they have been viewed, and I have often seen numbers in the millions on posts attacking Christianity. The clear message being conveyed is that all religion is bad and even evil and that believers are fools, at best, and evil, at worst.

In the face of this constant barrage, I do not believe it is a coincidence that, led by Millennials, the number of Christians has dropped from 2007 to 2014. For clergy, effectiveness will need to include competency in theology and logic, interpreting Scripture in a way that will stand up to this type of attack.

Religious Diversity

The diversity and empowerment of minorities also show up in religion in the amazing number of offerings of different religions, cults, sects, and religious philosophies that are currently available and practiced in America. Today over 217 Christian denominations can be found in the U.S., according to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research (“Fast Facts”). Internet searches list far more offerings—up to 6,500 religious denominations in America including Zen Buddhism, Yoga, Tai chi, Sufism, Tibetan Dzogchen, Wicca, and the list goes on and on. The diversity of approaches to God reflects not just a fracturing of society, and a competition with mainline Christianity for the souls of Americans. It also represents a deep spiritual hunger that is not being met by mainline churches. Clergy competency will include not only presenting Christianity in

ways that are attractive but knowing where to go to get information about these competitors and their beliefs and practices. For example, where I live in Florida is a few miles from the international Scientology headquarters in Clearwater, so I have learned a lot about their beliefs and practices and can answer most of the frequently asked questions of my congregation and community.

Emphasis on Seeking Meaning and Balance in Life

The one positive trend is that as they are growing older Millennials are recognizing that life is short and that one should seek as much meaning and balance as one can. Millennials will continue their well-known trend of seeking authenticity. Jesus said, “Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions” (Matt. 7:20, NLT), and, “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples” (John 13:35). Therefore, as was true in biblical times, the validity and value of Christianity will continue to be proven by the lives and witness of its followers. Clergy effectiveness will be shown in the authenticity of loving behavior and words they exhibit, and that they can inspire in others. In worship clergy will be looked to, to provide worship experiences and enable authentic spiritual experiences.

Changes in Manufacturing Shifting to a Majority Robotic Workforce

Two hundred years ago, 98 percent of Americans grew some kind of crops or raised some kind of food animals; today only 2 percent still do. This transition represents a gigantic social change, and an equally gigantic social change is just on the horizon with robotic technology. Experts are predicting that 30 percent of current American jobs will be performed by robots within ten years, and conservatively, 70 percent will be replaced within the next eighty years. Some experts have expressed optimism that these displaced

workers will find employment, just as those who were employed in agriculture found new jobs in the industrial age, however other experts project that advances in artificial intelligence and robotic technology may prevent displaced workers from finding employment (Kelly). I shudder to think of the social unrest that would be caused by a 70 percent unemployment rate.

As computers continue to improve the cost of robotic technology will go down increasing the use of robots. New generation industrial robots cost just \$22,000 compared to up to \$500,000 for a first-generation industrial robots (Aaron Smith). Economists talk about *postcapitalism* being brought about by the amazing explosion of information technology in the past twenty-five years. As 30 percent of the jobs in the current American workforce are eliminated and replaced by robots over the next ten to fifteen years, society will be faced with an ethical dilemma that Christianity and pastors must have a role in determining. The dilemma simply is whether society takes the high or low road regarding displaced workers. The high road is that as more and more manufacturing and other jobs are taken over by robots the result will be shorter work weeks and greater sharing of the wealth with all. The low road is ignoring the problem of massive unemployment with the result being widespread poverty and social discord.

The World War II generation of Americans remember the optimism after that war ended. It was hoped that as mechanized mass production became more and more sophisticated the riches would be shared and people would enjoy more leisure time. The reality is that American workers work longer hours and more hours than the workers of any other of the major industrial nations. Americans also have less guaranteed vacation time, less family leave time, and retire later (Shabner). This trend, if it continues, would

point to the nation going down the low road. This trend could cause even more turmoil and struggles for the churches in America as they try to maintain buildings and ministries in the face of economic downturn. In any case the clergy will have a role to play in the future. In his book Stephen Seamands writes about the future: “To be sure, the church is an instrument of God’s mission, but God’s mission precedes, initiates, defines, and sustains the church in mission. Consequently, not a mission because a church, a church because a mission” (161). What Seamands writes is encouraging: If the church exists because it is fulfilling a mission or missions from God, then the church will continue to exist because the mission will still exist. If mission continues then the need for leaders will continue as well.

A Demand for Authenticity

The George Barna Research Group reports that they have conducted 27,140 interviews with Millennial-generation men and women and they found that the number one factor Millennials are looking for in a church is authenticity. Millennials who have rejected the church, see Christians as inauthentic representations of what their faith should be, as judgmental (87 percent), hypocritical (85 percent), anti-homosexual (91 percent) and insensitive to others (70 percent), and more than one-third (35 percent) say their negative perceptions are a result of moral failures in church leadership (“What Millennials Want”). The rejection of hypocrisy is nothing new but the demand for authenticity, paired with a demand for excellence, means pastors will be ministering to a generation of people who are skeptical and very hard to please, representing a huge challenge for those presenting the gospel. Clergy competency will be marked by ability to do the work of maintaining a deep, strong relationship with God.

The Post-Postmodern Era—Current Theology

Psalm 78:65 says, “Then the Lord rose up as though waking from sleep, like a warrior aroused from a drunken stupor.” The description of God waking up like an enraged drunken warrior to take on injustice is an amusing image, and something many Christians might love to see. Many in the Church would be content to at least see progress. Post-postmodernism is a turning away from the philosophy of the postmodern era which emphasizes the elusiveness of truth. In its place agreement is growing among scientists, philosophers, artists, writers and theologians that one *can* know enough truth to function effectively in the world, and that is sufficient for daily living. Some have termed this new view, *critical realism* (Kirby).

Within Christian theology the current trend is a return to the presumption that God is knowable, that God knows us, and that God loves and wants relationship with us. In his book, Rueben Job advocates a return to Wesleyan simplicity. Job lifts up as spiritual disciplines Wesley’s traditional means of grace (i.e., prayer, fasting, Communion, corporate worship, reading and studying the Bible). Spiritual disciplines, according to Job, help Christians experience the presence and power of Christ, which, in turn helps provide the passion a faithful disciple needs to live the life of a good Christian:

We may name our spiritual disciplines differently but we too must find our way of living and practicing those disciplines that will keep us in love with God—practices that will keep us positioned in such a way that we may hear and be responsive to God’s slightest whisper of direction and receive God’s promised presence and power every day and in every situation. It is in these practices that we learn to hear and respond to God’s direction. It is in these practices that we learn of God’s love for us. It is where our love for God is nurtured and sustained. (53-54)

The concepts Job mentions: *being in love with God*, and *receiving God’s presence and power*, are clearly the language of experiential religion. Also found in current theology is

a growing appreciation of the contributions of other religions to the practices of approaching God and a movement to incorporate some elements of their practices and philosophies into the practice of Christianity.

Wayne Teasdale (1945-2004) is typical of this trend. He was a Catholic Monk and college professor who taught at DePaul in Chicago. Teasdale promoted unity of the major faiths, and he believe personal spiritual experience is critical:

Religion and spirituality are not mutually exclusive, but a real difference. The term spirituality refers to an individual's solitary search for and discovery of the absolute or the divine. It involves direct mystical experience of God, or realization of vast awareness, as in Buddhism. Spirituality carries with it a conviction that the transcendent is real, and it requires some sort of spiritual practice that acts as a catalyst to inner change and growth. Spirituality, like religion, derives from mysticism. The *Interspiritual Age* has begun. A small but significant number of people in all the religions are transending boundaries in search of enlightenment, salvation, or mystical realization. (16)

The distinction Teasdale makes between belonging to a religion and being a spiritual disciple is a common theme among those hoping for a Christian revival in America and is popularized with colloquialisms such as the oft repeated, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car." The movement is reflected in a rather surprising way by the amazing rise of nondenominationalism.

The Rise of Nondenominationalism

The rapid rise of nondenominationalism is a part of the movement towards spiritual experience based Christianity. The movement began with the post-World War II generation, beginning in the late 1960s and intensifying in the last twelve years with the rise of the Millennial generation. As early as the late 1960s, evangelicals began responding negatively to the congregations where they were members, which were filled with what they considered spiritual deadness. People belonged to a church, but they

seemed to have no emotional or authentic spiritual experience inside the building. They saw denominational bureaucracies grow larger but without success as they felt churches growing colder.

Christian blogger Thom S. Rainer conducted a survey among his subscribers to find out why they left mainline denominations to become members of nondenominational churches. His top eight responses were these:

1. Denominational churches have a negative reputation. Some respondents used the phrase “negative brand” to communicate this reason.
2. Denominations are known more for what they are against than what they are for.
3. There is too much infighting and politics in denominations.
4. The denominational churches are too liberal. From what I can tell from these respondents, they are current and former members of mainline churches.
5. There is a general waning of institutional loyalty in institutions such as denominations.
6. Denominations have inefficient systems and organizations. They are too bureaucratic.
7. Some of the respondents could see no perceived benefit to belonging to denominations.
8. Denominations are not good stewards of their financial resources. (Rainer)

Obviously, people are leaving the mainlines to join nondenominational churches for many reasons, however, underlying all these causes is a desire for authentic and excellent experiential Christianity.

An Ascetical Theology—The Pursuit of Spiritual Experience

A new theology is arising out of post-modernism and reflects confidence of post-postmodernism. The new emerged understanding of God is called ascetical theology. The word *ascetical* is from the Greek word meaning *practice*. It is really a revival of long-held tradition in the Christian church of emphasizing the importance of spiritual

experience as a foundation for faith and practice. Driskill writes about what was then a small but growing revival movement for a return to emphasizing spiritual experience:

Many mainline Protestant churches are exploring the power and significance of spiritual discernment models for managing church life. Although in the past Robert's Rules of Order have been used extensively, new approaches involve taking time to discern the activity of God in the midst of church meetings and programs. The belief that the Spirit actually is at work where two or three are gathered together now moves from its status as a general theological affirmation without much relevance in daily life, to a belief that guides the institutional life of the church. (26-27)

Today the ascetical practice of taking time to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit is more commonly practiced in mainline churches.

Job's *rules* are reflected in the main points of ascetical theology:

- God knows every person intimately and desires to be known in return because
- God loves every person on earth and
- Wants relationship with everyone that
- Is based on real experience of God's love and power, and
- The experience of God's love etc. is fairly easily obtainable, and
- Is intended for all, and
- Spiritual experience is empowering for faith and practice and vital for pastors

and, thus, for the health of the church (Olsen).

Ascetical theology includes the perpetual pursuit of spiritual experience and spiritual growth. Blackaby is probably the best-known or widest-read proponent of experiential Christianity. Blackaby and King's book demonstrates a solid scriptural basis for their theology. To make a point about the importance of knowing God, they start their book with this quote from Jesus: "This is eternal life, that they may *know you* [emphasis mine], the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Their

theology has two main points: First, that one can do lots of different things to bring oneself to the place physically, spiritually, and emotionally to be ready and able to experience God; and second, knowing God is like knowing any person:

Jesus said that eternal life is know God, including God the Son—Jesus Christ. Jesus did not mean that eternife is “knowing about God,” In the Scriptures knowledge of God comes through experience. We come to know God as we experience Him in and around our lives. You will never be satisfied just to know about God. Really knowing God only comes through experience as he reveals himself to you. (7-8)

Blackaby’s term *experiencing God* at work through you is reminiscent of the terminology concerning *the inwards witness* that Wesley’s father expressed repeatedly.

In their book Tilda kNorberg and Robert D. Webber give good explanation of, and a justification for, healing prayer. I speak from personal experience when I say that seeing someone healed as a result of prayer is an unforgettable spiritual experience. In the section below I am quoting Norberg and Webber below, but substituting the words *spiritual experience* for *healing*:

1. Christian [spiritual experience] is not magic. It is not manipulating God to do what we want; rather, it is surrendering to God’s spiritual work in us.
2. Christian [spiritual experience] is not to be sought as a spiritual thrill for the individual but as a way to grow as a Christian.
3. Christian [spiritual experience] is not proof that we are faithful or holy, but a sign of God’s love.
4. Christian [spiritual experience] is a process that involves the totality of our being—body, mind, emotion, spirit, and our social context—and that directs us toward becoming the person God is calling us to be at every stage of our living and our dying. (26-27)

These are words from a sound, biblically based theology, that give a practical approach to spiritual experience.

Another common theme in the newly emerging ascetical theology of postmodernism is *the centrality of love*. It sounds and looks very much like the

unstructured love of mysticism that Wesley rejected as a doctrine. The centrality of love is emphasized broadly, in the writings of old mainline stalwarts such as Job and Steve Harper and with Catholic and nondenominational authors as well. Harper, for example, starts out his book quoting that passage and these words: “There was no bona fide way to begin any Christian movement, awakening or revival apart from the way of love” (4-5). Speaking about the two greatest commandments Jesus said, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:40, NIV). From this statement many have over the years attempted to simplify the requirements of Christianity down to just loving God and loving others.

The theology of asceticism takes the biblical statements about love and goes about *unpacking* them and then taking them to the extent of their logical conclusions. Three passages about love are of central importance. The first two, found together, are given when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment. Jesus answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.’ The second most important commandment is like this one. And it is, ‘Love others as much as you love yourself’ (Matt. 22:37-39, CEV). The third passage is in John’s first letter: “We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them” (1 John 4:16, NLT). As these and other passages about love are unpacked, a number of powerful conclusions can be drawn.

If God is love, then in love “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). If God is love, then people are made by love, with love, in love and for love. The only potentially missing piece is the soul for God created human beings with the freedom to accept his love and allow it into our soul or to reject it. Saint Athanasius famously said,

“God became man in order that man might become God” (“Profession” par. 1.460).

Merton writes that to have eternal life is in some sense to be made God, to have the Holy Spirit unite with a human spirit is also in some way to be made God or to rise up into the fullness of Christ:

According to St. Paul, the innermost self of each one of us is our “spirit,” or *pneuma*, or in other words the Spirit of Christ, indeed Christ Himself, dwelling in us. According to the mysterious phrase of St. Augustine, we then become “One Christ loving Himself” (*Inner Experience* 22).

The highest ideal of the experiential approach to Christian faith is to be transformed in such a way that one becomes a child of God in the way that Christ was a child of God.

Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit priest, continued in the tradition of Merton writing his bestseller about spiritual exercises.. His work is typical of the fusion movement—his exercises combine Scripture with Roman Catholic spiritualism, modern psychology and Zen Buddhism. The exercises involve the whole self-body, mind, soul and emotions with the goal of providing spiritual experiences of God.

William A. Barry and William J. Connolly write about how ascetical theology is beginning to answer is the challenge posed by biblical criticism:

If the search for the historical Jesus has been such a problem for modern biblical scholars, can we still use the gospels to come to know him? The first point to be made is an obvious one: it is not finally helpful for prayer for Christian living to base it on a delusion. Hence, it is important to see the Gospels for what they are. Contemplation of Mark's Gospel, for example, means taking that author's work on its own terms and trying to listen to his work as he meant it to be heard. To be able to contemplate Mark's Jesus and to know that it is Mark's Jesus one is contemplating and not necessarily Jesus in all his historical reality is a help to one's perspective. For one thing, one will not then be dismayed by every new discovery of biblical scholarship.

Secondly, it should be said that one need not be a Scriptures scholar to use the Gospels for prayer. The desire is not to know the scripture text better rather it is to know Jesus better. But the more one knows about the

gospel, the better one can look at and listen to it and not to one's own cultural and personal projections on to it. (56)

One might wish they had given more attention to the explanations of why the Gospels can be accepted in the face of the criticisms of modern theology. At least they point to the importance of the concept that one can believe in Christ and not be concerned that one is being delusional. In ascetic theology, accepting the legitimacy of the contributions of biblical criticism to the understanding of Scripture does not detract from affirming that in truth the writing of the entire Bible was inspired by God and that it is “useful for teaching, for reproof for correction and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16), as Paul wrote.

Criticisms of Spiritual Experience-Based Theology

In spite of his own mystical experiences, Wesley rejected mysticism as a dangerous enemy of Christianity. He believed mysticism was too intangible and too subjective to provide for the orderly conduct of a religious institution. If spiritual experiences were relied upon to produce the entire guidance for the ordering of a religious denomination then Wesley is correct. Experience of God through nature alone has led some religions to embrace human sacrifice and/or cannibalism. Fortunately the ascetic Christian quest for spiritual experience is sound theology, solidly scripturally based and grounded in many centuries of Christian tradition.

Other theological criticisms that are typically leveled against spiritual experienced-based practice of religion include

- that it is too emotional and not sound theologically,
- that it produces a faith that is in the shallow and rocky soil—easily destroyed

by intellectual challenges to faith,

- that its practice lends itself to manipulation of the flock by unscrupulous leaders,
- that it is narcissistic, and
- that it promotes inward focus rather than missional focus.

The last criticism is the most ironic. Being criticized for taking the time to develop and/or maintain a strong relationship with God is shortsighted, in light of the reality that a strong relationship with God is what undergirds the work of Christian mission.

Luther's conception of salvation by grace through faith alone was based on the premise that one have a deep personal faith nurtured by hours of daily prayer: "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing" ("15 Martin Luther Quotes"). The idea of spending hours a day in prayer has come under attack from both the liberal and conservative wings of theology. Conservatives say, "Because mystics rely on subjective, private, spiritual experiences for guidance and wisdom, they diminish the authority of Scripture. Vision and spiritual encounters become more important than the truths found in God's Word" ("Faith Midguided"). Mystics throughout history, from Augustine to Ignatius have proved this negative assessment to be false.

Liberal theology sees this kind of attention to God as narcissistic and as self-absorbed, at best, with a dangerous potential for self-delusion, at worse: "The greatest real danger is of attitude. Pride can lead to spiritual deception, mistaking intellectual change for spiritual progress. Fear can cause us to give up, and rationalize away the need for transformation" (Zuck). In reality the danger of spending too much time in seeking personal spiritual experience is also a false premise. Jesus set an example of spending

hours in personal prayer (Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35; 6:46; Luke 6:12) and virtually any Catholic saint and any great Protestant leader in the history of Christianity are all known for spending hours in prayer. These saints of the church were deeply touched and energized by deep powerful spiritual experiences of God. Their experiences then shaped their ministry philosophies and practices and therefore became the foundation for the success or effectiveness of these great leaders.

Research Design

To ascertain the link between spiritual experiences and a pastor's effectiveness, I created a mixed-design, quantitative and qualitative survey. In her book, Patten provides a helpful description of the advantages and disadvantages of using questionnaires in research. The advantages are that, if properly designed, responses are usually easy to tabulate, and the resulting data is therefore easy to analyze. The disadvantages are that the response rate to survey questionnaires is generally low, and that many respondents give answers that are not fully accurate because they think the truth would not be socially acceptable. Even when surveys are conducted anonymously, the need for approval is so strong in some people that they will still respond with less than full truthfulness (3). I also learned from Patten how to design multilevel questions to gain clarity when a quantitative question has too many possible answers to account for with a simple question (36-37).

In designing the research instrument, I took guidance from Creswell's book *Educational Research*, as to why a mixed-method questionnaire (i.e., using both qualitative and quantitative questions) provides an advantage in attaining the fullest understanding of the answers to the research question (551-53).

Summary

The expectations on clergy in the postmodern/post-postmodern era are still being fleshed out. Clergy will need to assume many new non-traditional roles and responsibilities. While the need for the traditional roles of sharing the Word of God, counseling, comforting, encouraging, and providing spiritual guidance will continue to be important, how new technologies will affect those roles is still not clear. As society becomes more fractured the pressure to specialize, to perform niche ministries will increase. Clergy will also, as long as the church exists, continue to need to be intentional about the task of self-care. Self-care is not a defensive act of self-preservation (although at times that may be needed); instead, taking on the activities that feed the soul is like the preflight instructions one receives on an airplane that one should put on their own oxygen mask on first, then help the person they are traveling with. Self-care for clergy will continue to mean caring for one's own soul and relationship with God before concentrating on the souls of others.

All clergy who take their calling and their work seriously are concerned with having a real gage of how effective they are being. Having attended a five-day clergy seminar with Warren at his church in California (as a part of Asbury's Beeson Scholars program), I can recall clearly him reciting his attendance and baptism numbers for the recent past. The same thing is true for Adam Hamilton when I have attended seminars at his church. Clergy, as most human beings do, naturally feel somewhat competitive towards each other, but keeping track of membership and attendance numbers should be about serving Jesus, not about bragging rights. A humble clergy person should be somewhat insecure when considering if they are doing enough to serve Christ. As the

pastors and leaders of North Point Church in Atlanta, one of the largest churches in the country, Andy Stanley, Reggie Joiner and Lane Jones, in their book disagree with the notion that average attendance and monetary stewardship are the best measures of success for clergy. They recognize that these numbers are important but they prefer other measures:

At North Point we have never set attendance goals, and we rarely promote financial targets. A different set of questions comes to mind when we talk about what it means to win. For example, do attendees feel comfortable inviting their unchurched friends? Are members recognizing the need to give a percentage of their income? How many individuals are successfully connecting to small groups? Do our people understand how to apply the scriptural truths we're teaching in their daily lives.

When you're looking over your lesson or sermon notes, the question to ask yourself is not is it true? Is it interesting? Is it creative? Is it passionate? Is it entertaining? Instead, ask yourself, Is it helpful? If it isn't helpful then it isn't relevant. (71)

The measurements Stanley, Joiner, and Jones use to describe winning really are just measuring the things that lead to growth in attendance and church finances. As it is pejoratively described, *nickles and noses* are inescapably signs of success; without money and people a church cannot exist.

In an e-mail exchange I had with Barna several years ago, he said that he prefers to measure success by asking how many lives have been changed and how many people are activated into ministries of service and discipleship (Barna, "Research Project"). Robin R. Meyers writes that success is about removing the barriers that prevent it:

turning loose the community property that is the gospel of Jesus Christ and then removing obstacles that keep people from thriving in such a community. The success of Mayflower Church has come mostly from the irrepressible desire of its people to respond to the call of God. (15)

While some clergy and experts prefer other measurements than numbers—membership, attendance and stewardship—the reality those numbers are inescapable because a church cannot function without them.

Whatever challenges the postmodern era or the post-postmodern era present clergy in the future, clearly clergy effectiveness will continue to stand on the solid rock of having a personal, intimate relationship with God. It is also clear that spiritual experiences of God strengthen relationships with God, and that there are many different concrete steps that Christians can take to move themselves to a place emotionally, spiritually, mentally and physically where these experiences will take place.

The paradox of Christian spirituality is that: spiritual experiences are a gift from God. They are not for sale at any price, as gifts of God's grace, by definition one cannot do or say anything to earn or become entitled to have them, and neither can one choose the type of gift they will receive. Paul writes, "It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have" (1 Cor. 12:11). While Christians cannot choose the gifts they will receive they can take steps to open themselves to receiving the Holy Spirit. Merton observed this dichotomy:

All that we can do with any spiritual discipline is produce within ourselves something of the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart and the indifference which are required if the inner self is to make some shy, unpredictable manifestation of *his* [emphasis mine] presence. (*Inner Experience* 7)

Merton is saying that while spiritual experience cannot be demanded of God, steps can be taken to prepare the heart and mind to create the conditions that are optimal to having a spiritual experience.

The tougher and more confusing times become, and the more society splinters, the more Christianity can be and must be a unifying and empowering force. Christianity cannot unify and empower society through intellectual argument alone, or even through emotion-based spirituality. Christian leaders and pastors need to lead the way with theology that is both intellectually and biblically sound and with feet firmly planted on the rock that is a spiritual experience-based personal relationship with God.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Problem

In the book of Revelation there is a warning to the church in Laodicea that addresses what seems to be the main problem facing the church in America today:

I know everything you have done, and you are not cold or hot. I wish you were either one or the other. But since you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spit you out of my mouth. (Rev. 3:15-16, CEV)

Lukewarm Christianity, to the author of Revelation, is failing Christianity. Where lukewarm leadership prevails the church fails. Experts in church growth agree that the church rises or sinks, succeeds, or fails largely on the strength or weakness of its pastoral leadership. The decline of 8,000 members per year in the Florida Annual Conference is not generating a heated response there, any more than nationwide decline in the Methodist denomination of 70,000 members per year is generating. These numbers terrify me but they do not seem to terrify the leadership of the church. My experience as Methodist pastor for the last thirty years is that the response of leadership to this crisis has not been passionate, but lukewarm, and the evidence is that God seems to be spitting out our members. The clergy of the United Methodist church are highly educated, with full membership in an annual conference requiring a three-year Master of Divinity degree, so the decline is obviously not due to a lack of education.

In this time of general decline, some pastors are leading their churches into such growth in numbers and health that they come to be identified in their community and by their denominational authorities as highly successful and effective leaders. At the same time their churches are also recognized as models of Christian vitality and health by the bishop and district superintendents. As a result of the success of these pastors and their

churches they have done some teaching at the district and conference level to share the techniques and ministry models they employ, however these pastors seem to share the trait that they are passionate about what they are doing. Learning ministry techniques and models does not make you a passionate leader. No research has been done into what gives these pastors the passion that seems to be contributing to their ministry philosophies and ministry practices, which in turn, drive these model pastors to their *effectiveness* and success.

Society is changing in terms of the perceived importance of religion. Christianity in America is in a precipitous decline—down over ten percent in the last seven years (*America's Changing Religious Landscape* 1). This decline is not an anomaly. It is neither a temporary setback, nor will it be easily changed. In fact, the indicators all point to the sad truth that the decline will get much worse before it stabilizes or gets better. Driven in part by dramatic changes in technology, traditional Christian values that guided society for many centuries have been and are being pushed aside. The church is aging rapidly, in large part because the continual attacks on the authority on which the church has stood for faith and practice—its Scripture and tradition—have effectively cut off the younger generations, Millennials and Gen X, from the church. The church has failed to mount an effective defense, much less go on the offensive. Leaders are helpless to stop the waves of cultural change and seem clueless as to how to proceed: The rate and scale of change have far outstripped their ability to keep up.

As a result clergy will be ministering in vastly different circumstances than they have ministered in for the last two thousand years. They will face many new and different challenges, and they will need new skills. If clergy are going to be effective in leading

away from the path of decline and destruction in the postmodern and post-postmodern era they will need all the theological training and knowledge they can get. They will need to employ the ministry behaviors and practices that will lead to effectiveness, and they will need the help of God. For all these reasons, discerning the factors that can contribute to making pastors effective is vitally important.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to uncover the extent to which select pastors of the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church attribute their success, in whole or in part (e.g., their ministry philosophies and their longevity in ministry), to having had critical spiritual incidents or experiences that occurred prior to or soon after they entered into ministry as their profession.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The theological premise of the study is based on the scriptural and historic views of the United Methodist tradition and informed by current theology and my personal experiences and those of other Christians I have encountered in thirty years of pastoral ministry, yielding the following beliefs:

1. God is real and loving, the Creator and sustainer of all things, who, in love for humankind, wants a personal, intimate, and loving relationship with each person, through his son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.
2. God the Creator is actively working to draw every person gently into a more and more loving and faithful relationship.

3. A part of God's plan is to enrich this relationship by providing experiences wherein God's activity is discerned in specific results best or most logically attributed to divine intervention.

4. Individuals can take steps to enrich their relationship with God and become more worthy reflections of Christ by using spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and other means of grace. These steps can prepare the practitioner spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically to receive spiritual experiences of and/or with God.

5. The clergy giving primary attention and time to developing an experiential relationship with God is the key to the revival of their church and, on a larger scale, the church of Jesus Christ in the world.

The survey conducted for this project gathered both qualitative and quantitative information related to the pastors' spiritual experience, passion, and ministry effectiveness and also statistical information about the pastors' age, number of years in full-time service, and information about their church settings, attendance, stewardship, and involvement level of the congregation in service and discipleship.

Research Question #1

How do selected pastors describe the sources of their ability to stimulate church growth? My research assumption was that pastors will reference significant spiritual experiences as contributing to their ministry philosophies, which, in turn, inform ministry practices to which they will attribute their *effectiveness*.

In order to answer this question fully, a series of follow-up questions were asked to discern the trail of connections between critical spiritual experiences and self-perceptions of effectiveness.

Research Question #2

What common denominator arises from the discourse about antecedent spiritual experiences among select pastors? Widespread agreement exists in literature both that critical spiritual incidents lead a person to perceiving a clear vision of a task or calling from God and to having a passionate commitment to its realization and that perceiving a clear vision of a task or calling from God and having a passionate commitment to its realization are critical to success (Walters; Mayo; Warren, “Restate”). Therefore, the assumption is that highly successful pastors will have had critical spiritual incidents to which they credit their success. The survey questions were given in two parts: (1) a yes or no part, and (2) a part asking, if the first response was yes, how? For example, “Have the spiritual experiences you have had affected your vocational passion and, if so, how?”

This kind of question is a mixed-method question, the responses to the first part of the questions eliciting a yes or no response are tracked quantitatively and charted in Appendix A. This second part of the question, “if yes, how?” elicited qualitative responses with a multiple possible choices. The qualitative answers were also tabulated and compared to see if a common denominator in the ways pastors report that their spiritual experiences inspired them.

Research Question #3

How do select pastors make connections between and/or distinctions between the chain of antecedent spiritual experiences they have had and the ministry philosophies they have formed and between the chain of antecedent spiritual experiences and evidence-based results that meet local criteria for *effectiveness*. My research assumption was that the select pastors will identify in common independent variables (i.e., ministry

practices and skills such as quality preaching, teaching and systematic involvement of laity in ministries of their church), and in common confounding variables (i.e. the amount of time spent in daily prayer, and Scripture reading) that may explain their effectiveness and that conform to theoretical models of efficacy but that they will likely refer to antecedent spiritual experiences.

The research here aimed to find out if among these selected pastors a common foundation exists of critical spiritual experiences at the beginning of their ministry or related to their calling into ministry and, if so, how these experiences shaped or formed their philosophies of ministry. How are the memories of these experiences processed internally in such a way that they are perceived to contribute to their ministry practices? How are the memories of these experiences processed internally in such a way that they are perceived to contribute to their ministry success?

Population and Participants

Twelve criteria-nominated clergy were selected from the 720 churches of the Florida Annual Conference for semi-structured, ninety-minute interviews. The selection criteria included the following qualifiers: Clergy had to have served a church that grew significantly under their leadership to an attendance mark of over seven hundred, and they also had to be nominated as a *highly successful pastor* by the bishop of the Florida Annual Conference. No regard was given to age, race, gender, or number of years in ministry. Selections were made purely on the grounds of perceived exemplary leadership, and the strength of the church's excellence or outstanding success accomplishing the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

The selected pastors were from Tallahassee in the north of Florida to Sarasota in the south to Tampa, and Orlando in the center of the state. All were serving urban or suburban settings. As a way to encourage their participation, and in an effort to maintain scrupulous honesty, the selected pastors who were asked to participate in this survey were told in advance of the survey that they were nominated by the bishop.

Design of the Study

The study was designed to focus on a select group of pastors identified as being the most effective and/or successful pastors in the Florida Annual Conference, to look into their personal histories of critical spiritual experiences and see if a common pattern or denominator can be identified. The research assumptions were that a common pattern or a typical history would emerge, that these pastors would reference these experiences as being key to the formation of their philosophies of ministry and their ministry practices, and that they would reference these experience as key to their perceived success.

The research instrument was a seventeen-question, mixed-method survey administered in person in a ninety-minute, face-to face meeting. The study was conducted in May and June 2016 in the offices or churches of the selected pastors and, on several occasions, over lunch or in meeting rooms at annual conference. All pastors were asked the same demographic and qualitative questions and were selected on the basis of having led their churches to become recognized or perceived in their communities and by denominational authorities as highly successful in terms of fulfilling the highest hopes or expectations of performance in terms of models of health and vitality, and success in accomplishing the denomination's stated goals for a local church in carrying out the

mission and ministry of Jesus Christ as described in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* (pars. 201-02).

All of those selected to take the survey were United Methodist pastors employed in full-time pastoral ministry within the Florida Annual Conference, or in one case, recently retired. All the pastors interviewed were serving or had served churches significantly larger than the average attendance of eighty-nine for a United Methodist church.

Instrumentation

The research instrument for this study was a seventeen-question mixed-method survey. The design was informed by suggestions on questionnaire research design from Patten on structuring questions in such a way as to eliminate or mitigate any ambiguity. I screened the questions for reliability and validity using the suggestions of Creswell, and for awareness of the existence of possible variables for success as suggested by Bandura's model of sources of self-efficacy. Multiple-choice answers were offered with anticipated top answers, as Patten suggests. The opportunity to be able to describe the impact of spiritual experience on their ministry allowed for purely qualitative answers. It also preserved the validity of the question by allowing for unanticipated results to be surfaced.

The eleven qualitative questions of the survey centered on the spiritual experiences of clergy, giving pastors a chance to describe in their own words the impact of their spiritual experiences on their sense of calling, ministry philosophy and practices, and ministerial effectiveness. The six demographic questions helped provide a framework in which to place the results of the qualitative questions. The demographic questions were

asked to help contextualize the respondents. The qualitative portion of the survey was crafted to include the three research questions and other seven questions designed to tease out the fullest answers for the research questions (see Appendix A).

The six demographic questions gathered information about the clergy person's age, years of service in ministry and current setting, the number of pastoral appointments they served, previous employment, and level of education. The ten qualitative questions were designed to allow the gathering of information that helped quantify and identify common denominators of prevalence of spiritual experiences, patterns of typical types of impact on the formation the pastor s' philosophies of ministry and ministry practices.

Pilot Test

For the pilot test of the survey instrument, I selected six United Methodist pastors with whom I am friends in the Florida Annual Conference as a focus group to take and review the survey. I prepared a grid for them to fill out afterwards asking, if any questions are unneeded or unclear. This focus group were asked the survey questions (see Appendix A) and filled out an evaluation of the questions as they were being asked (see Figure 3.1).

Q #	Needed	Not Needed	Clear	Unclear	Suggestion to clarify
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					

Figure 3.1. Survey evaluation grid.

The result was that all questions were affirmed as needed and clear. The only suggestion was to change the order in which they were asked to take into account that in the original format I was asking them about the impact of critical spiritual incidents on their life and ministry before I asked them if they had actually had any critical spiritual incidents.

Reliability and Validity

According to Creswell, the best way to ensure reliability and validity of the results of a survey is to have questions that are properly designed (*Concise Introduction* 171-72). This survey was designed to be valid using Creswell's construct validity model (173-75). This form of validity was chosen because it allows me to address both demographic statistics and ministry philosophies and practices at the same time to produce results that are significant, meaningful, and useful.

According to Creswell, mixed-method research is the most widely used research form since it can yield the fullest and clearest picture. According to Creswell, one of the common pitfalls in doing research that would undermine the validity of a study is to narrow the questioning to the extent that spontaneous unanticipated answers would be prevented from surfacing (*Educational Research* 221). To counter this concern, multiple choice answers were offered with anticipated top answers, as Patten suggests; however, the opportunity was also given for respondents to be able to describe the impact of spiritual experience on their ministry, allowing for a purely qualitative answer.

Data Collection

I collected data using the following methods: personal face to face interviews, observations, voice recordings of interviews and field notes, filling in the blanks on a standardized interview form. The data collection (interviews) began in May and were concluded in June 2016.

The select pastors were asked each question in the survey and, in the case of the qualitative questions, occasional impromptu questions were asked to help elicit the fullest responses to survey questions. The surveys resulted in eighteen completed responses: six from the reference group and twelve from the select pastors. The interviews were conducted in person, in most cases in the office of the select pastor, although several interviews were conducted over lunch and several were conducted in meeting rooms in and around the Annual Conference meeting in Orlando.

Before beginning, each select pastor was given, read and signed the independent review board-approved informed consent form (see Appendix D). The pastors were also given a sheet of paper giving the definitions of the terms being used in the survey to read

in advance (see Appendix B). The survey question interview form was used each time, and each of the questions was asked of each pastor. I filled out the answer sheet for each question as the answer was being given. The interviews were recorded on an iPad as well. Immediately after the interview was completed, I took some time to read over the answer form and think about the answers I recorded to make sure everything important was noted. When all interviews were completed the results were tabulated for each question and the comments.

Data Analysis

This survey collected both demographic information and qualitative data requiring analysis to be carried out on both types of data and enabled a cross comparison of results to see if factors other than spiritual experiences could be determined to be contributing to the success of the select clergy. A summary analysis of the literature that I read and surveyed for this research project reasons a link between a pastor's vocational efficacy and antecedent critical incidents. These considerations were applied, the data gathered, and results, when statistically significant, were noted and commented on.

Demographic questions were asked of the select clergy to see if a pattern or commonality would emerge regarding their demographic information. These results were compared and correlated with the answers to the qualitative research questions. The qualitative data was analyzed for common variables concerning how, if at all, the selected pastors ascribe connections between their antecedent spiritual experiences and their ministry philosophies, and between the chain of antecedent spiritual experiences and evidence-based results that meet denominational and local criteria for *effectiveness*. The analysis of the qualitative data also looked to see if common denominators emerged from

the data concerning the prevalence of antecedent formative or critical spiritual experiences incidents or episodes among these pastors. Lastly the data was examined to see if a link could be found between the selected pastors' spiritual experiences and their sense of being called into ministry.

Ethical Procedures

In order to protect the privacy and rights of the participants, and explain the purpose of the survey, each pastor was given the independent review board-approved form and asked to read and sign it prior to the commencement of their interview. The survey contains the following words, assuring the participants of the following ethical procedures:

In order to protect your privacy I have both read aloud and asked you to read and sign below that you understand that if you are quoted in this dissertation you will be identified only by letter (for example *Pastor A*). Your name and church name or names will not be referenced, and any name you mention will be changed to keep replies anonymous, however, depending on your responses, it is conceivable that someone might be able to deduce who the participant is.

Please Note That:

1. Our interview will be audio recorded and the recording will be transferred to and kept only on my personal home computer which is password protected.
2. Care has been taken that the questions asked to participants will cause you no harm. However, should you feel at any time during the interview that a question is in any way potentially or actually harmful to you please mention it and we will skip that question.
3. Additionally you can discontinue or drop out of this research project at any time without any penalty.

The full disclosure form is in Appendix D.

chapter 4

findings

Problem

As a United Methodist pastor, I am required to attend the annual conference meeting in which all of the pastors from a given geographic area (in my case Florida) together with lay representatives from each local church meet for a few days each year for a conference that is equal parts business meeting and spiritual rally. Part of the business each year is to hear the conference statistician tell us how the conference did in the past year in membership and attendance. Each year is the same: a report on the annual decline of Methodism in Florida.

The annual report of the statistician also includes statistics that show which churches are growing. These are generally the same churches each year. My own personal experience has run counter to the trend of decline: four of the five appointments I have served have grown under my leadership, and the current church is at least holding steady while many other Methodist churches around my church are declining. Three churches in my district have closed in the eleven years I have been appointed in my current setting. Thinking about my own work, which counters the downward trend, and that of other pastors whose churches are also growing while the rest are declining makes me wonder if a common denominator can be found among the pastors whose churches are going against the downward trend? Is there a *formula for success* that could be copied?

In my case I attribute my success to having an underlying foundation of profound spiritual incidences, critical spiritual experiences that shaped my ministry philosophy,

clarified my vision for ministry, increased my passion for ministry and empowered me to go on in the tough times. If the other pastors whose churches are resisting the downward trend also have a similar underlying foundation of critical spiritual incidents that helped them grow their churches while other churches around them did not see growth occurring, then this would be the *formula for success* that pastors seeking ministry success could emulate. In other words, pastors seeking to be successful could devote their attention to seeking spiritual experiences that in turn would empower them for ministry and help inform and shape the ministry practices and ministry philosophies that contribute to success. For all these reasons, this research was planned to see if spiritual experience in clergy is a vital ingredient in the formula for clergy success. Interviewing the most successful clergy in the conference using a survey form was the basis for the qualitative research into this subject.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to uncover the extent to which select pastors of the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church attribute their success, in whole or in part (e.g., their ministry philosophies and their longevity in ministry), to having had critical spiritual incidents or experiences that occurred prior to or soon after they entered into ministry as their profession.

Participants

There Florida Annual Conference has a total of about eight hundred pastors including those appointed to extension ministries, and those who are associate pastors. When I discussed my dissertation topic with Bishop Ken Carter of the Florida Annual Conference, he said he was interested in the subject. I told him I wanted to interview the

top ten pastors in the conference, and he agreed to nominate fourteen clergy for the study (his top ten and the next four additionally in case of difficulties obtaining interviews with some of those selected). I suggested four pastors I was interested in interviewing and he sent me a list with ten other names. I sent a letter and a follow-up email to all fourteen pastors. All agreed to be interviewed; however, one was prevented by last-minute scheduling conflicts and one never responded to repeated emails and calls to his office after he first agreed to be interviewed. Since I was able to secure interviews with twelve pastors, I decided in the interest of a fuller sample to interview all twelve. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with the twelve pastors (eleven were male and one female), using the interview form as a basis for the discussion (see Appendix A).

I asked Bishop Carter to nominate his *most successful or effective pastors* and to use this selection criteria—clergy:

- who are or were employed full time in pastoral ministry in the Florida Annual Conference (recently retired would also be fine),
- whose leadership is considered exemplary,
- whose churches are perceived in their communities and by the bishop and district superintendents as examples of excellence or outstanding success in accomplishing the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ,
- whose churches are reporting growth in membership & attendance and if possible have an average attendance mark of over seven hundred.

I chose these pastors purely on the grounds of their perceived exemplary leadership and the strength of the church “accomplishing the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ”

(Appendix C) using the standards of success of the Florida Annual Conference and the recommendation of the bishop.

The Florida Annual Conference measures the health and success of each of its 720 churches by requiring monthly reports, using five criteria, be submitted to the conference office by each of its churches. Since these are the five criteria that the Florida Conference uses to determine the level of success of a local church in accomplishing the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, I decided to use these same criteria for this study in my letter to the bishop requesting his help. The five factors are (1) making disciples, which the conference measures by professions of faith and baptisms; (2) annual attendance in weekly worship; (3) equipping disciples, which it measures by monthly attendance in small groups and discipleship groups; (4) service in the community, which it measures in the number of hours the congregation volunteers in service outside the local church; and, (5) financial health, which it measures by the church's percentage of it apportionments paid. These pastors all are or were (two are newly retired) serving churches with demonstrated strengths in all of these areas.

In order to test the clarity and effectiveness of the survey instrument's questions and format, I also interviewed six other pastors using the same survey form and questions. These pastors were United Methodist friends of mine, selected with two criteria in mind: They had to be close to me geographically because my survey requires a face-to-face interview, and they had to agree to be interviewed. Five were in my district and one is a United Methodist pastor from Minnesota who was visiting on vacation. These pastors, the reference group, are not recognized as highly successful or effective. Their careers would be described as more typical and average. The reference group

members were selected to give me feedback on the clarity and utility of the questions. As I asked each of the qualitative questions, I asked them to rate the questions using a feedback form with space to write comments on for each question. Their responses that all the questions were clear and useful although two of the pastors who described themselves as “not a success in the eyes of the Annual Conference” suggested broadening the definition of success in question one. One pastor suggested that I ask question nine, on whether or not the participants had one or more spiritual experiences, first or at the beginning since it was key to the other questions, so I did take that advice in the interview process.

The level of sadness and frustration the reference group expressed about their ministries during their interviews was surprising to me and made me sad for them. Later as I compiled the results of my selected top pastors and compared them to the reference group, several other differences emerged that were so striking that I realized I needed to include them in this chapter as a reference to help contextualize the responses of the select group.

The pastors nominated by the bishop, the *select pastors*, are serving in churches from every corner of the state, requiring me to travel over 1,200 miles to conduct the interviews. All are serving urban or suburban settings. As a way to encourage their participation, and in an effort to maintain scrupulous honesty, the selected pastors who were asked to participate in this survey were told in advance that they were nominated by the bishop as being among his top pastors. Some pastors were initially guarded about revealing the details of their spirituality with me; however, as the interviews progressed

they all shared deeply and personally, most coming to tears as they spoke about the critical spiritual incidents they had experienced.

The survey included the gathering of some demographic information to help further contextualize the participants. Table 4.1 shows the demographic information gathered. Within the demographic questions striking similarities emerged concerning the average age of both groups, and the highest level of education attained (41 percent of the select pastors had doctoral degrees versus 33 percent of the reference group). Striking differences also emerged between the two groups concerning the average number of years in their current settings (247 percent higher for the select pastors), the average number of years per appointment for the select pastors more than double that of the reference group, and the percentage of those who were second career or who took time off from full-time pastoral service to spend time working or serving God in non-clergy positions (more than eleven years difference in average number of years served in full-time pastoral ministry since their ordination).

Table 4.1. Quantitative Survey Questions

Demographic Information	Reference Group	Select Pastors
Average age or age at retirement	56	56
Average number of years employed in full- time ministry	19	31.75
Average number of years in your present setting	4	13.6
Average number of pastoral appointments served	5.3	4.25
AVERAGE number of years per appointment	3.6	7.5
Are you a second career pastor? Or did you work in a non-pastoral role after becoming a pastor.	50%	8%
Percentage with Doctoral degree	33	41%

Research Question #1

My first research question focused on finding out if a commonality could be discovered among the most highly successful pastors in what factor or factors they ascribe their success to. In order to answer this question fully, a series of qualitative questions were asked to discern whether they perceived themselves as successful and/or effective and whether a connection or set of connections could be found between the number and intensity of the critical spiritual experiences these pastors had and their self-perceptions of effectiveness. This first question in the interview process served as a foundation to the rest of the questioning: of the select pastors, 100 percent did agree that they were a success in the eyes of the conference (see Table 4.2.).

Table 4.2. Question Concerning Self-Perceptions of Success—Part 1

Qualitative Question 1	Reference Group	Select Pastors
Do you consider yourself successful and/or effective?	100% yes	100% yes

Several of the reference group even said, “In the eyes of the conference I have not been a success, but to me I have been because...” and gave a range of reasons indicating that the quality of their ministry was more important to them than the quantities being measured by the conference. Several of the select pastors referenced their success or effectiveness both in terms of the measurements of success that the conference uses such as attendance and growth statistics of their church, but they also referenced the following: (1) “All my children believe in Christ;” (2) “I have been happily married for X years;” (3) “I have been faithful;” and, (4) “I am giving God my best.”

In question 2 I attempted to discover the sort of ministry practices to which they would attribute their successes.

In Table 4.3 the most impressive findings were in the areas of daily spiritual discipline, having a coach, level of physical health, and relationship with God. The select pastors all (100 percent) either now have one or more coaches, counselors, mentors, or covenant or accountability groups that they credit with helping them be more successful pastors in one or more ways, including staying emotionally healthy, staying in ministry through the tough times when they are tempted to give it up, and staying accountable to doing physical exercise. The emotional support that they receive from these coaches, counselors, mentors, or accountability group members ranked slightly higher for them in contributing to their success than relationship with God (i.e., 100 percent to 91 percent). This finding points to the importance of having emotional health and connection with other people as a component of clergy success. Additionally, 100 percent of the select pastors made an effort to exercise regularly and attributed at least a portion of their success to their efforts at maintaining physical health.

Table 4.3. Questions Concerning Self-Perceptions of Success—Part Two

Qualitative Question 2 Which of these factors do you attribute your success to?	Reference Group %	Select Pastors %
Daily spiritual disciplines (prayer, Bible)	33	84
Ministry philosophy	33	50
Close personal relationship with God	33	91
Coaching, feedback	17	100
Pursuing health physically	50	100
Other: A good supportive spouse	33	33

As I completed a number of interviews with these pastors, I realized a pattern was starting to emerge—one of balance. I have been blessed to have parish nurses in the churches I have served for the last eighteen years; therefore I am very familiar with the Parish Nursing Association’s four measurements of health: mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual. I recognized that the research was showing that the select pastors demonstrate a high degree of balance—in that they were healthy in all of these areas.

Question 4 assumed (incorrectly) that all highly successful clergy would have had multiple critical spiritual incidents or experiences. As I interviewed the pastors, I was amazed to find that two of the select pastors had not had any critical spiritual incidents in which they were sure they had heard something, saw something, or otherwise experienced something they perceived to be indisputably an action of God. Additionally several others said they had but when I pressed them to give a specific example they could not. Nevertheless, when I asked the entire group if their spiritual experiences had sustained them in ministry 91 percent answered yes.

Table 4.4. Question Concerning Longevity in Ministry

Qualitative Question 4	Reference Group	Select Pastors
Have the spiritual experiences you have had sustained you in ministry helping enable you to stay in ministry	17%	91%

Further questioning revealed that 100 percent of select pastors referenced their spiritual experiences as positively influencing them professionally in one or more ways, such as helping them to be more effective in leading people to Christ, or inspiring people to serve Christ in some way, or helping sustain them in ministry, or helping them develop

their philosophy of ministry. However, only 50 percent of the select pastors could describe one or more profound spiritual experiences they had wherein they referenced experiencing one or more miracles (an action or experience they categorized as indisputably the action of God). This response (i.e., 100 percent positively influenced by spiritual experience versus only 50 percent able to describe a spiritual experience) seemed to be a very significant disconnect, so I probed deeper to try and uncover to what spiritual experiences the others were referring.

Soon I came to see that all the select pastors felt very passionate about serving God, as I had expected, but the majority (83 percent) are primarily energized for ministry not from major events where God was clearly at work, but from lower intensity events such as feeling their hearts warmed while in a time of prayer or from *God-incidents* (as opposed to coincidents) where they thought this was probably the work of the Holy Spirit. For example, one pastor mentioned as the action of God, the way several factors all had to happen to enable him to move to Florida and begin ministry in the church he is now serving. Another spoke of completing a successful capital campaign and completing a new building as an example of seeing the Spirit at work, which, in turn, increased his passion for ministry.

Question 4 also pertains to longevity in ministry. The demographic questions revealed that 66 percent of my reference group took time out from full-time pastoral ministry of a year or more off after ordination, while none of the select pastors took time off. This small sample does not rise to the level of scientific certainty but it does merit further research to see if taking time off from pastoral ministry is an indicator of future lack of success in ministry. The demographics pointed to another interesting trend related

to being sustained in ministry: The select group stayed at churches for long appointment lengths, with those lasting twenty years or more being common for this group (50 percent) where appointment times of four years were typical for the reference group.

Again this small sample does not rise to the level of scientific certainty but is nonetheless a striking difference that would merit a more thorough examination in the future to see if this disparity of appointment lengths is found across the denomination.

In answering question seven the select pastors tended to credit their love for God and other influences such as their education or life experience as motivating them to use the ministry practices they reported, as opposed to being motivated solely by spiritual experiences. When I asked pastors if they prayed every day, the results were also surprising. If the point of prayer is interaction with God, the pastors displayed a wide range of how they preferred to interact with God. Some had a written prayer they read and prayed; one wrote out a new prayer daily, several walked and prayed; and, one just practiced the presence of God, with no spoken prayer at all. The common denominator is that all of the select pastors found ways to feed their spirit daily (see Table 4.5.) through some form of communion with God.

Table 4.5. Questions Concerning Practices of Ministry

Qualitative Question 7		
Have the spiritual experiences you have had led you to adopt practices of ministry that in turn have helped you be successful, such as	Reference Group %	Select Pastors %
Daily prayer	83	50 yes
Daily Scripture reading	33	50 yes
Fasting	17	25 yes
Other means of grace (specify)		
Holy Communion	17	—
Commitment to the great commandment and the great commission	—	25
Love of God and God's people	17	91
Sacred reading	17	25
Practicing the presence	17	25
Personal Sabbath time	17	25
Equipping people for Christian service	—	33

In qualitative question 10, my research question assumption was that the select pastors would have many critical spiritual incidents to reference. When I realized the fed-from-above/fed-from-below dichotomy, I broadened my definition of critical spiritual incidents to accommodate the spirituality of fed-from-below pastors by including all things that deeply influenced these pastors and made them feel closer to God or grow in their love for God or their desire for God. Then the results were as I had expected to find—they all are fed by many spiritual incidents, which are of a lower intensity level but nonetheless are critical spiritual incidents to them (see Table 4.6.).

Table 4.6. Questions Concerning the Number of Critical Spiritual Experiences

Qualitative Question 10 How many critical spiritual incidents or experiences have you had?	Reference Group %	Select Pastors %
None	17	17
1-5	75	33
6-20	17	33
More than 20	—	17

Research Question #2

My second research question aimed to discover if the select pastors typically had antecedent critical spiritual leading to their sense of their calling into ministry and whether the number and intensity of these critical spiritual experiences influenced their perception of the strength of their calling and their passion for ministry. The research assumption (that there would, in fact, be a relationship between the number and intensity of these experiences and their calling into ministry) was validated by the literature, which suggests that vision of and passion for ministry are necessary components critical to success and/or effectiveness and that vision and passion are driven by antecedent critical spiritual experience. With question 3 I followed up by asking the select pastors to describe the critical spiritual incidents or experiences that led them to feeling called into ministry (see Table 4.7.). Six of their stories are reported in Appendix E.

Table 4.7. Questions Concerning Critical Spiritual Experiences—Part One

Qualitative Question 3	Reference Group	Select Pastors
Did you have one or more significant or critical spiritual experience that either led to your sense of being called into ministry, and if so, would you share what you experienced and tell how it impacted you?	33%	50%

Several interesting discoveries came from this question. I was surprised that only 50 percent of the select pastors answered affirmatively. Of those who answered yes, one described having the same mystical experience three times after which he committed his life to God. Four described hearing God speak to them in an audible voice, and one heard God speak clearly and definitively in his mind. All of the 50 percent who answered *no* they were nonetheless absolutely certain about their calling. Their interviews showed that their sense of calling permeated to the core of their being. They might not be able to give a specific example of a single miracle they had seen or experienced, or a single incident they would label as undeniably the action of God, but in various little ways God had left them with no doubt whatsoever that they were called into pastoral ministry. Their calling was their rock and foundation, their touchstone when they experienced tough times, and there were several other parts of their life stories that were nearly identical.

They *all* were raised as Christians and grew up in loving Christian homes. They grew up loving God and literally could not remember a time from their earliest childhood when they did not believe in God. They felt a growing calling to serve God from childhood that they described as a gradual growing sense that their love for God and God's people was a calling. In each case this calling was then affirmed by others: most of them as they attended or began serving at a Methodist youth summer camp while in high

school. One of the select pastors who grew up in a Christian environment and sensed a growing calling that was confirmed in youth camp also later heard God call his name and tell him “I want you to be a pastor.”

It was quite remarkable how similar their stories were:

- They were raised in Christian households.
- They loved God from their earliest memories.
- They committed their lives to Christ at a young age (8-10 years old).
- They experienced a gradually increasing sense of being called into ministry.
- Their calling was affirmed or strengthened by some sort of experience when

they were serving in the youth group of their church.

- They had a close, loving relationships with their Christian parents, and saw their fathers as role models.

The other half of the select pastors’ stories also sounded similar to each other.

They grew up with less internal security about their faith. They came to faith in a much more dramatic way than their counterparts. Where the former group experienced a gradually increasing sense of being called, this group experienced a more precipitous calling. They went from marginal believer, agnostic, or atheist, to believer, as a result of a critical spiritual incident. Their callings were remarkably similar in that it they heard God speak to them. Here is a typical example: “I was at the beach watching a sunset. I said a prayer to thank God for the beauty of the sunset, suddenly I heard God speak, and He said, ‘I want you to be a preacher.’” This was the type of calling is dramatic and empowering.

Table 4.8. Questions Concerning Vocational Passion

Qualitative Question 5 Have the spiritual experiences you have had affected your vocational passion	Reference Group %		Select pastors %
	Yes	No	
Led you to stay on in ministry	50	50	100 yes
Go on mission trips	67	33	100 yes
Share the love of Christ with people	67	33	100 yes
Give my life entirely to God	67	33	100 yes
Other: Led me to build/equip ministry teams			50

In my definition of terms, which I gave to each of the select pastors to read before I conducted the interviews with them, my definition of a critical spiritual incident is an event or occurrence in the life of the pastor in which the pastor felt or perceived the presence of God, or the action of God, or received a new insight into the reality or nature of God *and* which event or incident was taken as an authority for their philosophy of ministry or theology. The result of a critical spiritual incident is that the individual feels closer to God or grows in their love of or desire for God.

I was anticipating that pastors would give responses related to their perceptions of the direct and uncontested or indisputable actions of God. However, by the time I had conducted six interviews with the select pastors I realized that the pastors I was interviewing were not all going to have had, in the words of one pastor, a *Damascus road* moment. Still they were taking pains to describe key moments in their calling that to them were critical spiritual incidents confirming their call. They referenced things such as: hearing a sermon and then responding to an altar call and feeling great afterwards, or giving a sermon representing their youth group on youth Sunday and having it be well received by those who heard it. I realized these were key life-changing moments for

them. These moments that seemed sort of mundane to me, to them were critical spiritual incidents, even though these incidents did not involve any sort of supernatural occurrence. From that point on, in the rest of my interviews I added the word *or* so that the question said, “*and/or* which event or incident was taken as an authority.”

With my definition of critical spiritual incidents broadened to include those incidents that were mile marker moments for them, then 100 percent of the select pastors reported that their spiritual experiences had increased their passion for ministry, and 91 percent said their experiences led them to give their lives to God. What I also found by this portion of the interview process is that all the select pastors are highly motivated for service to God, passionate about serving, and highly deliberate or intentional about serving well. I asked them, “What is it that fires up your passion to serve?” I quickly realized that all the select pastors were answering this question much more fully than I anticipated. This question typically sparked a five-to-ten minute response in which they told me, in much greater detail than was needed for my survey, what things, beyond critical spiritual incidents, fired up their passion to serve, giving me multiple examples, until I had to interrupt them to move on to the next questions. It quickly became obvious how passionately they felt about the ministries they were leading. The things that they reported as firing up their spiritual passion to serve God fell into four basic categories: reading, relationships, physical exercise, and spiritual development.

Reading

One of the select pastors told me, “A leader is a reader!” This statement was borne out in the interviews as 100 percent of the select pastors reported drawing inspiration from their reading:

- 100 percent read the Bible weekly,
- 91 percent read the Bible daily, and
- 100 percent referenced reading books and/or articles by authors concerning ministry in some way: church growth, good clergy practices, spiritual development. One of the select pastors showed me his list of recently read books. He had read more than thirty books in the last seven months, both fiction and nonfiction.

Relationships

Several of the select pastors stated at some point in their interviews that they had introverted tendencies, but 100 percent referenced the emotional support they received daily or weekly from one or more sources:

- Relationships with congregation members 67 percent
- Relationships with other clergy 83 percent
- Relationships with spouse/family 67 percent
- Several of the select pastors (33 percent) referenced all three of these areas, and 25 percent also referenced receiving support from a mental health counselor on a regular basis.

Physical Exercise

One of the select pastors exercises daily in a highly ordered routine, and 100 percent of these pastors exercise regularly although several expressed a realization that they knew they needed to do better in that regard. Here an age disparity was revealed. The younger pastors in the group tended to have the more rigorous exercise routines such as running, lifting weights and swimming laps. The older pastors were into less vigorous

pursuits such as walking and playing golf, but all were intentional about making exercise a part of their weekly routine.

Spiritual Development

I would say that the most important realization I had from all the research questions and all the interviews was the amazing uniformity in the fact that each of these pastors continually fed their spirits. These pastors uniformly had a passionate desire to serve God and uniformly were grateful for and uplifted by having the privilege of being able to serve Christ:

- 100 percent were fed by daily prayer,
- 100 percent were nourished by their love for God, and
- 100 percent were fed spiritually by perceiving God moving in the lives of others they were serving in ministry.

I was heartened to realize the uniform love for God that all of these pastors have and to see how their passion for God translated into a passion to serve the Lord. One said, “It [serving God] has become like a virus in me.” This statement sounds negative, but I believe he meant that he was almost sick with desire to serve God.

These four categories fit together perfectly with the four categories of healthiness of the Parish Nursing Association: reading for the mind, relationships for the emotions, exercise for the body, and spiritual development for the spirit.

Question 6 showed that 91 percent of the select pastors reported that their spiritual experiences had affected their vision of or philosophy of ministry in some way. However 50 percent said they were only partly or a very small amount influenced by their spiritual experiences and 25 percent of the select pastors referenced the Great Commandment and

the Great Commission as being much more important than spiritual experience. One of the group said his vision of or philosophy of ministry was entirely influenced by the Great Commandment and the Great Commission and he specifically said, “My spiritual experiences—not at all.” The vast majority (83 percent) said their philosophy of ministry was primarily shaped by a combination of things, including their experience in ministry over the years, the reading they had done, the training they had received, and the influence of other people in their congregation, family, and ministerial connections (e.g., covenant groups, mentors, counselors; see Table 4.9.).

Table 4.9. Questions Concerning Impact of Spiritual Experience on Philosophy of Ministry

Qualitative Question 6	Reference Group	Select Pastors
Would you say that the spiritual experiences you have had affected your vision of or philosophy of ministry	%	%
Contributing entirely	17	17.0
Contributing greatly	17	33.0
Partly	33	41.4
A very small amount	—	8.6
Not at all	33	—

Research Question #3

The third research question aimed to discover to what extent the select pastors make connections and/or distinctions between the spiritual experiences they have had and the formation of their ministry philosophies, and between the spiritual experiences they have had and ministry results that meet local and denominational criteria for *effectiveness* and or *success*. My research assumption was that the select pastors would identify a number of factors that contribute to their success and/or effectiveness that conform to

theoretical models of efficacy but that they will likely ascribe a good portion if not all of their success to antecedent spiritual experiences.

In this case my research assumptions were markedly off. I assumed both that a direct line would become apparent between the number and intensity of spiritual experiences clergy claimed and their ministry philosophies, and between the number and intensity of spiritual experiences clergy claimed and their success in ministry. The number and intensity of critical spiritual incidents pastors have seem to have little bearing on the either the formation of their ministry philosophies or their success in ministry. Those who had the lowest levels of intensity of spiritual incidents were as successful and effective as those who reference over one hundred encounters with the miraculous.

For question 9 I need to qualify the answers: While 83 percent answered yes to this question, only 50 percent could recall and describe a specific critical spiritual incident that they had experienced. Several (23 percent) of those who said they had experiences, when asked to describe one such incident they were claiming to have, could not think of any specific incidents. Since 17 percent of the select pastors were honest enough to admit they could not name a single time they had seen or experienced something that was to them a direct action of God, and an additional 25 percent could not think of a specific instance, that means possibly a full 42 percent of these pastors did not have a single time in their life they had seen or experienced something that was to them a direct action of God. It did seem curious that so many of the subject pastors either had no miraculous experience in their lifetime or claimed to have experienced the miraculous but could not recall a specific single instance (see Table 4.10.).

Table 4.10. Questions Concerning Experiencing the Actions of God

Qualitative Question 9	Reference Group %	Select Pastors %
Have you had one or more spiritual experiences in which you heard something, saw something or otherwise experienced something you perceived to be an action or result of an action of God? (Question 10) How many of these experiences have you had?	66 yes	83
0	17	17 (2 pastors)
1-5	66	33
6-20	17	33
More than 20	—	17

Question 9 produced results that were surprising or certainly not what I expected to find. I expected to find that 100 percent of the most successful pastors would have had multiple critical spiritual incidents, but that was not the case. Instead their numbers trended a little higher than the reference group with only 75 percent having multiple experiences and seventeen percent reporting experiencing more than one-hundred miracles or critical spiritual incidents. The result of this surprising finding combined with other findings leads to the conclusion that having had dramatic or high intensity critical spiritual incidents is not essential to clergy success and/or effectiveness, although they certainly contribute to and are extremely important to some of the select pastors' effectiveness. Therefore, if a formula for clergy success is to be found it will be found elsewhere.

Pastors predominantly answered *all of the above* to question 8 and when I pressed them a bit further they added the last six responses listed in Table 4.11. Question 8 was interesting for the result that 91 percent of the select pastors reported that their spiritual experiences contribute to their success in one or more of these areas traditionally seen as

vital ministry skills and abilities. These responses also demonstrated a disparity between the reference group and the select group (see Table 4.11).

Table 4.11. Questions Concerning Critical Spiritual Experiences—Part Two

Qualitative Question 8	Reference Group	Select Pastors
Have the spiritual experiences you have had affected your ministerial effectiveness?	%	%
Helped me grow my churches	33	83
Helped me increase stewardship	33	91
Helped me increase the number of people in my church involved in discipleship and mission ministries	50	91
Helped me lead people to give their lives to God	50	83
Helped me to be a better preacher	67	83
Other (please describe)		
Helps me preach extemporaneously	17	—
Helps me help others with daily life	17	8
Helps me survive in ministry	67	8 yes
Helps me remain faithful to God		8
Helps me to be a better communicator		8
Helps me be a better pastoral care giver		8
Helps me stay in the church I'm serving		8
Given me courage-god confidence		8
Helps me stay in the church I'm serving		8

Many pastors, 83 percent of the reference group and 25 percent of the select pastors, reported that they considered ministry a struggle. The reference group described their ministry in terms of “trying to hang in there, dealing with difficult questions or difficult persons, trying to find motivation to keep going, surviving on sheer stubbornness.” The reference group saw the spiritual experiences they had as currently helping enable them to keep going on; they were more likely to feel that they were just barely able to continue in ministry and they viewed staying in ministry as a form of

success. The majority (66 percent) of the reference group were working “to get strength to hang in there,” in a survival mode. Alternatively, many of the select pastors reported times in their ministry when they felt they were struggling in ministry or, “going through the dark night of the soul,” but currently all of the select pastors were happy in their current place of ministry. It is a quite striking and significant disparity that 66 percent of the reference pastors report being unhappy in ministry versus 100 percent of the select pastors report being happy in ministry.

Question 11 aimed to find out if the select pastors typically use the critical spiritual experiences at the beginning of their ministry or related to their calling into ministry as a foundation for their ministry practices, and/or whether these experiences shaped or formed their philosophies of ministry. My research assumption here was that the memories of these experiences would be processed internally in such a way that they were perceived to have contributed to their ministry practices. The answer was surprising to me, 83 percent of the pastors said they rarely referenced their early critical spiritual incidents. These incidents for them were not in the front of their minds but rather they were buried deep in the back of their minds (Table 4.12.).

Table 4.12. How Pastors Refer Back to These Experiences

Qualitative Question 11	Reference Group	Select Pastors
How do you reference back to these spiritual experiences for inspiration?	%	%
Not at all	17	—
Do you keep a journal or written record of these incidents	33	50
Other (please describe)		
Mention them in sermons		50
Keep them in mind	50	25

Summary of Major Findings

The research indicates a set of commonalities among the most successful pastors, but that set does not include having had dramatic critical spiritual incidents. For example the pastor who could be described as, *the most successful pastor in the Florida Annual Conference* by the five criteria of success used by the Annual Conference, was one of the two select pastors who could not point to a single experience in which he heard something, saw something, or otherwise experienced something he perceived to be an action or result of an action of God. Instead, I did find that the research indicates five main ingredients to the formula for clergy success:

- a rock solid, unshakeable sense of being called;
- a commitment to healthiness in body, mind, spirit, and emotion;
- a great commitment to the two Great Commandments;
- a great commitment to the Great Commission; and,
- a competence in ministry practices.

The major findings of this research are these:

1. The select pastors all expressed utter certainty that they are called by God to serve him in ministry.
2. The select pastors showed an impressive level of healthiness in body, mind, spirit, and emotion.
3. These pastors are deeply committed to the two great commandments and this drives them in many ways.

4. The select pastors all spent many hours each year trying to learn more about good ministry practices and practical ways to built up their church membership, attendance and discipleship.

5. The select pastors can be divided into two categories: 20 percent whose primary inspiration and empowerment for ministry comes from dramatic critical spiritual incident concerning their calling (whom I have labled *from above* pastors) and 80 percent whose primary inspiation is from perceiving God in the ordinary and commonplace (whom I have labled *from below* pastors).

chapter 5

discussion

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to uncover the extent to which select pastors of the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church attribute their success, in whole or in part (e.g., their ministry philosophies and their longevity in ministry), to having had critical spiritual incidents or experiences that occurred prior to or soon after they entered into ministry as their profession.

Major Findings

I came to this project hoping to discover the ingredients of a formula for clergy successfulness or effectiveness that could then be shared with others seeking clergy success. My starting hypothesis was that virtually all highly successful clergy persons would be empowered and energized for ministry by dramatic critical spiritual incidents in which they clearly felt or perceived the presence of God or the action of God (i.e., miraculous events). This dramatic type of critical spiritual incident I thought was the key ingredient of the formula.

My hypothesis proved to be only partially correct. I was correct that *all* the select pastors *are* empowered and energized for ministry by spiritual incidents in which they clearly felt or perceived the presence of God, or the action of God. I was incorrect in my assumption that all highly successful clergy persons are empowered and energized for ministry by having had dramatic and/or miraculous spiritual incidents. Though 83 percent of the select pastors had experienced one or more dramatic and/or miraculous critical spiritual incidents, only 22 percent derived their primary empowerment, energy, and

passion for ministry from this source. All of the pastors who either had not had a dramatic critical spiritual incident, or who were not empowered and energized for ministry by a dramatic incident or incidents, nevertheless, were empowered and energized for ministry by spiritual incidents that were not dramatic or obviously miraculous but were for them still critical. Therefore I conclude that critical spiritual incidents are a key ingredient of the formula for clergy success and effectiveness.

The interviews uncovered that the most successful pastors have a wide range—a continuum—of experiencing the presence or the action of God from low intensity, such as reading a book and feel inspired by it, to high intensity, such as hearing God speak in an audible voice. To borrow from Paul, some see in a mirror dimly and others face to face (1 Cor. 13:12), but all are equally empowered. The discovery was that all the select pastors were highly energized and empowered, passionate about serving Christ, led me to realize that critical spiritual incidents themselves are vital but to making a pastor passionate about ministry, and that passion for ministry is another key ingredient of the formula for clergy success.

I also came to see that using terms like *high intensity* and *low intensity* in describing these experiences unfairly and incorrectly prejudiced me, and perhaps many others as well, towards *high intensity* experiences being better or more important than low intensity. In this case the size of the spiritual experience is not important but the size of the Spirit in the experience is or, perhaps more accurately, the perception of the Spirit by the pastor is most important. James describes these low intensity incidents as simple and rudimentary mystical experiences:

The simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be that deepened state of the significance of a maximum or formula which

occasionally sweeps over one. For example Martin Luther wrote: “When a fellow Monk one day repeated the words of the creed: ‘I believe in the forgiveness of sins,’ I saw the scripture in an entirely new light; and straightaway I felt as if I were born anew.” (5120)

By that standard all of the select pastors have mystical spirituality. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul describes the phenomena of being spiritually fed by serving Christ through the lower intensity avenues of teaching and learning:

If you warn the brethren of these dangers you will be a good and faithful servant of Christ Jesus, *inwardly feeding* [emphasis mine] on the lessons of the faith and of the sound teaching of which you have been, and are, so close a follower. (1 Tim. 4:6, WNT)

The select pastors are perceiving themselves to be spiritually, inwardly fed every day, or certainly weekly, in the performance of their duties.

The surveys did reveal several other essential ingredients to the formula for clergy success, commonalities that all the highly successful pastors had. The first ingredient is a definite calling from God. All of the highly successful clergy have a rock-solid, unshakeable confidence that they are called by God to ministry. The other essential ingredients are healthiness in each of four critical areas, a passionate commitment to the Great Commission, to the Great Commandments, and to competency in their ministry practices.

Select Pastors Empowered by God’s Call to Ministry

The strength of the perception of their calling from God that all the select pastors expressed in their interviews was one of the most unexpected findings of the survey. Interestingly, 50 percent of the select pastors had one or more mystical experiences leading them to feel called, including 41 percent who experienced a literal call from God, in which they heard God speak to tell them to become a pastor (see Appendix E). I

expected this group to have a much greater sense of the strength of their calling than those whose calling was not so clearly mystical. I was utterly taken by surprise that the other 50 percent were equally completely convinced of the unshakeable nature of their call, so the questioning around this issue was carefully and thoroughly conducted and it showed conclusively that 100 percent of the select pastors expressed absolute certainty about their call.

In the interviews each expressed that their strong sense of being called is the foundation on which they built their ministry. Speaking of the strength of their sense of being called, one pastor described being held in its grip, while another described sense of like being infected with a virus in the sense that it came from outside him but now permeated his entire being. One spoke about being tempted to quit ministry following the death of a loved one, but his call was like a good weight keeping him in place when he wanted to fly away. One even quoted Luther when describing this passion for ministry: “Here I stand I can do no other.” The strong sense of calling was vital to keeping the select pastors continually in pastoral ministry for their entire working careers, while fully 67 percent of the reference group took off one or more years from pastoral ministry and in two cases twenty or more years between pastoral appointments.

The pastors who did not have dramatic critical spiritual incidents involving their call were all raised in a Christian environment and grew up sensing God in their hearts and loving God from a young age. They also felt a tugging on their hearts from a young age—a sense that they should serve God in some way. One of the pastors described building an altar out of sticks when he was in third grade, and another described knowing, in a way he could not explain, that he was called into ministry by the time he

was in the third grade. These pastors felt their growing sense of being called to serve God affirmed through more mundane channels such as hearing words that spoke to their hearts in a sermon, the comments of a trusted clergy person who observed an apparent calling in them, and several who described their calling being affirmed through seeing the fruits of the labors in, for example, seeing that people's hearts were genuinely changed as a result of their preaching. These moments or incidents of affirmation are as clear, significant, important, and powerful to these pastors as the *Damascus Road* calling of the other pastors is to them.

This finding informs the practice of ministry in two ways: It indicates that a strong sense of calling is a predictor of clergy success and effectiveness. It also indicates that both types of calling, a literal calling from above and a calling from below where confirmation comes through a mentor or pastor or incident of Christian service, are both equally strong and equally empowering. This latter point is further illustrated by the fact that 100 percent of the select pastors were continually in pastoral ministry from the time of their ordination while 67 percent of the reference group took one or more years away from pastoral ministry in their careers.

An Exceptional Level of Healthiness in Body, Mind, Spirit, and Emotion

Another unexpected result of the survey was that the pastors are not just healthy they are robust. The Canadian Mental Health Association and the Parish Nursing Association both define health in terms of body, mind, spirit, and emotions (Ferris). These pastors are highly intentional and diligent about taking care of themselves in each of these four measurements of health. I was really surprised at the fact that 100 percent have *emotional support* in the form of nurturing connections to other pastors, mentors,

counselors, or covenant groups, and that 84 percent having more than one set of connections: a mentor and a counselor, or a covenant group and a coach. An impressive 100 percent of the select pastors expressed a commitment to taking care of their *body* through regular exercise. I was surprised at the hunger for knowledge these pastors demonstrate through their voracious consumption of books, both fiction for relaxation and nonfiction for professional enrichment. They are on a lifelong quest to improve their *minds* and their ability to do ministry. Without doubt, the most important thing I learned is to appreciate and emulate the way these pastors were able to feed their *spirits*, to be energized for ministry by daily searching for and drawing strength from seeing God work in little or subtle ways in the people and events around them.

These pastors are committed to their relationship with God, which they strengthen through daily prayer, daily Bible reading, and daily searching for and drawing strength from seeing God work in many little or subtle ways in the people and events around themselves. They excel in utilizing multiple ways to feed their spirits daily, and this spiritual feeding is inextricably tied to feeding their passion for ministry. The literature indicates that clearly the great majority of the great saints and leaders of the church through history were empowered by dramatic spiritual incident experiences. I expected to find the same would be true for the highly successful Methodist pastors in Florida. Instead, I found that the vast majority (83 percent) are empowered primarily by perceiving God in the day-to-day events of their ministry. They are tuned into looking for God in all sorts of places, including externally in the observation of the Spirit of God working through their sermons to change people's hearts and through seeing people becoming excited about serving the Lord. They are fed internally by reading the Bible

and other books, by prayer and meditation time, by walking in nature, and by many other means. In this way they now feed their spirits daily, not by seeing the hand of God moving in powerful ways, but by seeing his fingerprints on subtle movements in their daily life and ministry.

One of the pastors who said he could not recall ever seeing or experiencing a miracle or other action or event that was undeniably the action of God is, nevertheless, so fascinated by his perceptions of God working subtly, in the day-to-day events of his ministry, which he calls “glory sightings,” that he has institutionalized reporting on glory sightings in his staff meetings. Each staff member is expected to report on their glory sightings at their weekly staff meeting, and failure to have observed a glory sighting even once in the week is seen as a sign that something is seriously wrong with that staff person emotionally, spiritually or in some other way.

Love of God and People a Primary Motivation

The survey and interviews revealed that at the deepest level, the source of their empowerment and their passion for ministry, and even their sense of being called, derive from their deep love of God. Three of the select pastors directly named the two Great Commandments (Matt. 22:36-40) as driving their passion, their philosophy of ministry and their ministry practices. Another referenced the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), but when pressed admitted he was committed to the Great Commission because of his love for God. Another said, “What drives me is seeing people putting their faith into action; I’m seeing this payoff in lives transformed.” When I asked why he loved seeing people’s lives transformed, he said, “I had not really thought of that before.” I asked him if he thought he enjoyed seeing lives transformed because he loved people, and he said,

“Yes, that is it!” One pastor gave me a ten-minute mini-sermon on the importance of God’s love for us and our love for God and all the things that flow from that love. The unifying factor here is that because they love God deeply, they feel compelled to take care of themselves in body, mind, spirit, and emotions as a way to enable themselves to express their love for God by giving their best back to him in service. Because they love God and God commands it, they love others. Because they love others, they want others to come to know the joy of loving the God they know, so they feel a deep commitment to the Great Commission because they feel a great commitment to the Greatest Commandment, to love God.

Diligent Students of Ministry Practices

In answering the survey questions, the select pastors frequently referenced or quoted the teachings of the most successful pastors in America: “As Bill Hybels says,” or “Well, you know what Adam Hamilton does.” One pastor showed me a shelf of books he had read in the last two years about good business practices because he believed that the majority of business practices can be applied to the day-to-day operations of a church. He told me, “I am successful because I use a combination of business practices and spirituality.” Another showed me on his Kindle that he had read thirty-five books in the last thirty-five weeks., The majority were read to improve his ministry skills. When I asked them in the interviews to what they attribute their success, their responses revealed that they all recognized the importance of and utilized good business practices and good ministry practices borrowing heavily from the techniques and ideas of other highly successful pastors.

Feeding their spirits was essential to them all, but so were the other practical practices of ministry, especially finding multiple ways of being in partnership with the laity. They built their churches up through good ministry practices of involving and equipping the laity for service and discipleship and they all were intentional about providing quality preaching. I believe that their excellence in involving and equipping the laity for service and discipleship, and providing quality preaching were major contributing factors to the interesting demographic statistic I uncovered: The average number of years in their current setting for the select pastors was 13.6 years versus 3.58 years for the reference group. The interviews indicated that the length of time in their current settings is an indicator or sign of their success, not a cause of their success. They feel happy with what they are able to accomplish in and through their churches, so they want to stay, and their congregations see them as a success so they want them to stay.

From Above versus From Below Callings—Energy and Empowerment

The discovery that the select pastors can be divided into *from above* versus *from below* in regard to their calling and empowerment for ministry was very interesting and important. While 50 percent of the select pastors experienced a dramatic critical spiritual incident concerning their calling, that type of dramatic critical spiritual incident did not continue to happen for most of them. Only 20 percent reported continuing to experience and be empowered for ministry by frequent dramatic critical incidents. The other 80 percent of the select pastors, the *from below* pastors, are primarily empowered by much smaller and not dramatic spiritual incidents. The most practical and interesting part of this discovery was that regardless of whether they find their spirit being empowered from above or from below, all of these pastors are exceptionally good at feeding their spirits.

They are spiritual omnivores. These pastors are richly fed spiritually not just in instances or experiences where they see the hand of God indisputably causing the action but also and especially from events that seem to have the subtle fingerprints of God on them. I believe a great lesson can be learned from the focus of these pastors, a lesson that I have embraced for my ministry and one that perhaps can be fairly easily disseminated and may be helpful to the general church.

To further explain the *from above* versus *from below* model, these labels should be thought of as tendencies, and all pastors seem to have a preference for one or the other. However, both tendencies are found in each of the select pastors to one extent or another. One pastor gave me the analogy of the Myers-Briggs test where most introverts have some extroverted tendencies and most extroverts have some introverted tendencies, but one or the other is usually more dominant. What was most striking to me was not where their main source was but that these pastors all access multiple sources to feed their spirits. All of them have quite a number of ways they feed their spirits, including prayer where at one extreme a pastor has written out an extensive thirty-minute long prayer which he prays every word of every day and at the other extreme one rarely prays using words but instead practices the presence of the Lord. For all of the select pastors their spirituality was like a river fed by many streams.

Paul's message to Timothy, that he should fan into flame his spiritual gift, is evidence that one's spirituality can be deepened through intentional action. These pastors do not neglect to fan their gifts into flame. They excel at looking for and perceiving God at work in what is around them in the day-to-day performance of their pastoral duties. This intentionality in looking for God in the commonplace events of life is a perspective

that I believe can be taught and would have a positive impact on the performance and level of success of clergy.

Implications of the Findings

I am delighted that I was able to discern a clear recipe for clergy success, and even more delighted that several of the ingredients of clergy success can be taught or facilitated. Several steps or ideas emerged from this study that the bishop could implement that my research indicates would help the clergy under his appointment to be more successful. These are things he can ask his pastors to do with little or no additional expense, that would strengthen the health of the pastors and improve their ministries.

Limitations of the Study

This being a one person project, it was of necessity conducted on a small scale. I spent over thirty hours of driving time, covering well over 1,200 miles, to spend about thirty hours in conducting interviews. I only interviewed six clergy for the reference group, a representative group but whose number is probably too small to be taken as truly statistically valid. However, the vast differences in demographic and qualitative answers between these two groups, especially concerning the number of years in their current setting, and average number of years per appointment, were so great that they certainly merit further study.

Unexpected Observations

I was shocked at the general robust healthiness of these clergy that 100 percent were committed to regular exercise, that 100 percent had an emotional support structure in place, and that these pastors were such avid readers and learners. I was especially surprised at the richness and variety of their spiritual diets. These pastors were constantly

finding ways to feed themselves on the Spirit. A verse from the old gospel hymn *Beulah Land* comes to mind: “I am feasting on the manna from a bountiful supply. I am drinking from a river that never will run dry” (Miles). The image of feasting is what the research revealed. These pastors seem to be feasting from an endless supply of spiritual nourishment. I was also expecting to find a connection between large scale dramatic critical spiritual incidents and clergy success. I found, instead, that large-scale, dramatic critical spiritual incidents occurred in a lower percentage of pastors than I expected, and that while they played an important role for a smaller portion of clergy, dramatic critical spiritual incidents were much less important to clergy success than the ability to perceive the Spirit at work in the small-scale, common, day-to-day incidents of ministry.

Recommendations

I would like to make a number of recommendations to my to bishop and to bishops across the country. My research revealed several key ingredients to clergy success that bishops have the power to effect. Bishops can ask the pastors under their appointment to participate in certain activities that will:

- strengthen them as Christians,
- help them be more healthy,
- help slow or reverse the decline of conference membership and attendance,
- help decrease the pain and frustration of the less successful pastors, and
- help pastors in general to improve their ministry practices and effectiveness.

The research shows that healthiness of body, mind, spirit, and emotions is essential to clergy successfulness and effectiveness, therefore, I recommend the Bishop do the following to influence the healthiness of the clergy in Florida:

First, the Florida Conference measures the vital statistics of each church every week and month, under the theory that measuring success rates in ministry areas will tend to produce better results in those areas: the same principle can be applied to clergy healthiness. Wesley's Holy Club met weekly to ask the famous twenty-two questions. Clergy may not want to meet weekly but I strongly recommend a monthly health check email should be sent to every clergy person from the district offices with a short form to fill out and e-mail back that asks the clergy how they are doing in the practices the most successful pastors employ:

- How many hours did they spend in physical exercise each week?
- How many hours did they spend in prayer?
- How many hours this month did they spend reading Scripture or other

literature aimed at improving your spirituality or ministerial effectiveness?

- How many hours did they spend in an emotionally supportive setting (outside of time with their spouses)?

A minimum healthiness standard should be set for each of these four categories, and if any of the minimum standards are not met in any of these categories for three consecutive months, this lapse will be seen as a red flag. The district superintendent will then be charged with working with, or creating a team to work with, the clergy person to develop a plan to address the deficit.

Second, since passion for ministry service is vital to clergy success and effectiveness, and since emotional healthiness is strengthened by inter-clergy connections, required quarterly district level conferences should be held requiring all district clergy to attend with the sole purpose to increase their level of passion for serving Christ. These should be

at least two-thirds of a day, including lunch, with the expectation that the pastor will use the other one-third of the day for prayer and reflection. These conferences should have no other business but the dual purposes of strengthening connections between clergy and increasing pastors' passion for God. These should be led on a rotating basis by the most effective and passionate pastors in the conference.

Third, since good ministry practices are vital to clergy success and effectiveness, twice annual, required, half-day, competency-in-ministry practices training sessions should be held. These also should be taught by the top clergy in the conference. If these clergy are on district or conference committees they would be expected to give up their service in that month to concentrate on being available for teaching at these events, and they might be compensated for their preparation time with the expectation that this service is above their normal service to their church.

The Florida Conference has suffered eighteen consecutive years of decline. At present, 85 percent of its churches are maintaining or declining. The programs and activities that the conference has followed in the last eighteen years have focused on improving ministry practices, but these have not halted or reversed the downward trend. A set of common characteristics of highly successful pastors, whose ministries reverse the downward trend, has been identified. These characteristics include the use of good ministry practices, but while good ministry practices are important to each of them, they are not the key. The key is what motivates the good ministry practices in highly successful pastors, and this key is spiritually based not knowledge or practice based.

Behind the the keys to clergy success are (1) rock solid foundation of one's sense of calling, (2) a passion to serve God that originates in both the sense of ones calling and

in one's personal experience with God, (3) a disciplined and balanced approach to personal spiritual healthiness that expresses itself in a commitment to physical, emotional, mental as well as spiritual health. Even though these keys are spiritually based, this research project indicates that a spiritually based approach to the problem of decline can and should be explored. The research indicated that passion for serving God can be nurtured and developed and will result in increased clergy effectiveness, as well as overall clergy healthiness. A number of low cost steps can and should be implemented to teach and promote passion for serving God, awareness of one's calling, and overall healthiness.

Subjects for Future Study

Six ordinary or average clergy are a number too small to be anything more than an interesting representative group; however, the sadness and frustration this limited sampling uncovered suggests an urgent conference-wide, follow-up study. They may be the tip of an iceberg and compassion demands that conference attends to the needs of its clergy who are suffering.

As I completed the second-to-last interview, the pastor I was interviewing asked me if my research had found a difference between the spirituality of introverted pastors versus extroverts. I had not looked into that question, but I realized that the question of whether the pastors' personality traits were related to their spiritual preference or whether their theological or political liberalism or conservatism affected their spiritual preference, would also make an interesting study.

Postscript

Based on my own experience as a *fed-from-above* pastor, I was looking for and expecting to find that the most successful pastors would be those whose passion is fed by encounters with the miraculous. I had hoped and expected to find that deep, powerful spiritual experiences were the key to clergy success and effectiveness. I wanted it to be true because I thought that clergy who wish to become more successful as pastors could be fairly simply led to use spiritual exercises on spiritual retreats aimed at producing spiritual experiences. I envisioned that the new spiritual experiences would empower these Pastors and stimulate clergy success. This approach would be a sort of simple and quick fix for the problem of decline in the church: Get the pastors fired up with spiritual experience and take care of the problem.

Instead, I found that only about 20 percent of pastors are primarily fed as I am by their frequent encounters with the miraculous. My research assumption's balloon developed a slow leak as the interviews progressed, but it was popped entirely when I interviewed the person I had most wanted to interview: the pastor who is statistically far and away the most successful pastor in Florida. He of all people could not reference ever having seen or experienced a single miracle or undeniable action of God. The assumption I had carried around in the forefront of my mind for many years was shattered, and I was shocked. Nevertheless, he was clearly, from his conversation and personal and professional disciplines, consumed with passion for the Lord. In twenty years he had grown his church from average weekly attendance of four hundred to over two thousand. When the interview was complete, he said he hoped it had been helpful. I told him it had

been but that he had completely punctured my balloon. On the long car ride home, I tried to collect the pieces of my research and see what was left.

After I got over my shock and disappointment, I thought about the fantastic ministry success and effectiveness of this completely *fed-from-below* pastor. I looked again and more deeply at what he had said about his spirituality. It was so different from mine but still so powerful. I looked at his spirituality from the perspective that whatever he is doing is highly effective, so I needed to figure out what it is. I realized that a commonality exists between himself and all the other select pastors, both those *fed from above* and *fed-from-below*. The highly successful pastors were continually (i.e., on a daily or near daily basis) being deeply and fully reenergized spiritually. I realized my interviews showed that he and the other highly effective *fed-from-below* clergy all (1) were highly intentional and even passionate about feeding their spirits, (2) had a passion for ministry was equal to or greater than the *fed-from-above* pastors, (3) had a different spirituality but of equal or greater value to that of the *fed-from-above* pastors, and (4) had an effectiveness in ministry equal to or greater than the *fed-from-above* pastors.

In quick succession these revelations led me to both a confession, and a new ministry focus. I had to confess that as a *fed-from-above* pastor, I thought my way was superior, but hearing and seeing how these *from below* pastors got so fired up for ministry from seeing God moving in subtle ways through others humbled me and taught me a lesson I will remember for a lifetime. I confessed to God the arrogance of my sense that my being fed from above is superior to the spirituality of fed-from-below pastors. I made a strong commitment to look a lot harder for God at work in and through my

congregation and to feed my spirit from a wider variety of sources. I look forward to seeing the impact of this epiphany on my ministry in future years.

Appendix A

Survey instrument

A Survey Concerning: The Spiritual Experiences of Clergy and Their Impact on Ministry

Philosophies and Practices and Pastoral Effectiveness

Thank you for your participation in this survey of a select group of Florida clergy! You have been nominated by our bishop as one of the 12 most successful and effective pastors in the Florida Annual Conference. This survey is being conducted as a research project in satisfaction of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree from Asbury Theological Seminary. If you so choose your name and church name or names will not be referenced, and any replies will be kept anonymous. You will be identified only by letter (for example *Pastor A*). No further effort will be made to contact you in the future. The survey results will be available upon request by emailing twehrlich@aol.com.

By clicking this box I certify that I AM WILLING to be quoted by name and that I give my consent for my survey results to be used as a part of this study. ()

By clicking this box I certify that I am NOT willing to be quoted by name and that I give my consent for my survey results to be used as a part of this study. ()

PART ONE: Demographic Information

- How old are you?
- How many years have you been employed in full-time ministry?
- How many years have you been in your present setting?
- How many pastor appointments have you served?
- Are you a second career pastor?
- What is your highest level of education attained?

PART TWO: SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

1. You are perceived by your Bishop and District superintendents as a highly successful and effective pastor. Do you consider yourself successful and or effective? Why or why not?
If not, what are your measurements of success?
2. Which of these factors do you attribute your success to? (daily spiritual disciplines, ministry philosophy, ministry practices, close personal relationship with God? vision? coaching, feedback, personal healthiness emotionally, physically & mentally, other(s) _____, _____, _____)
3. Did you have one or more significant or critical spiritual experience that either led to your sense of being called into ministry, and if so, would you share what you experienced and tell how impacted you?
4. Have the spiritual experiences you have had sustained you in ministry helping enable you to stay in ministry, and if so, how?

5. Have the spiritual experiences you have had affected your vocational passion
 yes no
 and if yes, how? (Check all that apply)
 Led me to stay on ministry go on mission trips
 share the love of Christ with people give my life entirely to God other(s)
 _____, _____, _____)
6. Have the spiritual experiences you have had affected your vision of or philosophy of
 ministry, and if so, how?
7. Have the spiritual experiences you have had led you to adopt practices of ministry that
 in turn have helped you be successful, such as (Check all that apply)
 Daily prayer Daily Scripture Reading Fasting other means of grace specify
 _____,
8. Have the spiritual experiences you have had affected your ministerial effectiveness and,
 if so, how?
 (Check all that apply)
 Helped me grow my churches Helped me increase stewardship
 Helped me increase the number of people in my church involved in discipleship and
 mission ministries Helped me lead people to give their lives to God
 Helped me to be a better preacher
 Other (please describe) _____
9. Have the spiritual experiences you have had involved one or more of your five senses?
10. How often have you had critical spiritual incidents or experiences?
11. How do you reference back to these spiritual experiences for inspiration? Do you keep
 a journal or written record of these incidents or do you use another method? Other
 (please describe) _____

Appendix B

Survey definition of terms

For the purposes of this study A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE OR CRITICAL SPIRITUAL INCIDENT OR EPISODE, can be defined as an event or occurrence in the life of the pastor, in which the pastor felt or perceived the presence of God, or the action of God, or received a new insight into the reality or nature of God and which event or incident was taken as an authority for their philosophy of ministry or theology. The result of a critical spiritual incident is that the individual feels closer to God or grows in their love of or desire for God.

The words *or episodes* are included in recognition that some milestone events might not be restricted to a single point in time.

MINISTERIAL PRACTICES include prayer, fasting, meditation, Scripture reading, taking the sacraments, speaking to people about their Christian beliefs, being involved in a Bible study group or accountability group, and performing acts of charitable service. These practices are referred to in both Methodist and Roman Catholic theology as the means of grace and are not limited to clergy.

MINISTRY PHILOSOPHY or philosophy of ministry are the beliefs a pastor has about what Christian ministry is, what a minister does, what God is calling the church to do, and how a church should be run. A philosophy of ministry is *the meeting point of beliefs and task*.

EFFECTIVENESS, *highly successful*, and *effective* are used interchangeably in this survey and are defined as pastors who have led their churches to become perceived in their communities and by the bishop and district superintendents of the Florida Annual Conference as models of health and vitality and whose churches are reporting growth in membership and attendance and whose churches are perceived in their communities and by the Bishop and cabinet as examples of excellence or outstanding success accomplishing the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

VOCATIONAL PASSION: The working definition for this thesis for *vocational passion* is a consuming desire to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. This desire both empowers and drives the individual to serve Christ in such a powerful way that the pastor feels he or she *cannot do anything else* as a vocation.

APPENDIX C

LETTER TO BISHOP CARTER ASKING FOR HELP

Dear Bishop Carter,

Hi, I hope this letter finds you in good health. I don't know if you would recall this, but last Fall I approached you at the clergy retreat in Leesburg to see if you would be willing to help me with the research project I am conducting for my D.Min. dissertation at Asbury. Specifically I asked you if you would be willing to suggest a list of a dozen of your most effective or *highly successful* pastors that you consider the top pastors of the Florida Annual Conference because I would like to interview them for my project on clergy spiritual experience and its influence on clergy effectiveness.

You asked me about my project and I told you a little bit about it and you said that it sounded interesting and that you would be willing to help. You asked me to send you an email with the specific details. I did not send anything to you until now because I was waiting first to have a successful initial defense of my dissertation, which I did this past December, and then a successful hearing on my research questions and informed consent form by Asbury's Institutional Review Board, which I have just received.

My dissertation research project is entitled: "The Relationship Between Critical Spiritual Incidences and Their Impact on Pastors' Calling, Ministry Philosophy and Success in Ministry." It is my intention to interview a dozen of the most highly successful clergy in Florida and see if a pattern that emerges, or if a link can be established between clergy successfulness and antecedent spiritual experiences or critical spiritual incidents (as opposed to a gradual sense or awareness of calling). I will be using an interview form with 6 biographical questions and 11 qualitative questions (attached) asking these clergy about their past spiritual experiences and their perception of whether these experiences have contributed to their perceived success or effectiveness, their sense of calling, their philosophy of ministry and ministry practices, and their ability to stay in ministry.

The names of the clergy will be kept confidential. I will not reveal them in my dissertation nor will I reveal them to other pastors in the Conference. I will send you a copy of my dissertation when the project is complete.

My dissertation defense review board members said they would accept as valid participants any 12 you put forward as your most successful or effective pastors. I am most interested in clergy who

- are or were employed full-time in pastoral ministry in the Florida Annual Conference (recently retired such as Jim Harnish would also be fine)
- whose leadership you consider exemplary
- whose churches' are perceived in their communities and by yourself and your district superintendents as examples of excellence or outstanding success in accomplishing the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ
- whose churches are reporting growth in membership and attendance and if possible have an average attendance mark of over 700.

So far I have spoken with Pastors A, B, C, and D [names removed from original letter and substituted with capital letters] who all agreed to take my survey. If you would

agree with these four then I would like you to nominate 10 more (two additional in case any decline).

Thank you very much in advance for your help in this research project.

In His Joy,
Tim Ehrlich

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent Form

Thank you for your participation in this survey of a select group of Florida clergy! You have been nominated by our bishop as one of the 12 most successful and effective pastors in the Florida Annual Conference. This survey is being conducted as a research project in satisfaction of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree from Asbury Theological Seminary. My dissertation is entitled: "The Relationship Between Critical Spiritual Incidences and Their Impact on Pastors' Calling, Ministry Philosophy and Success In Ministry."

In order to protect your privacy, I have both read aloud and asked you to read and sign below that you understand that if you are quoted in this dissertation you will be identified only by letter (for example *Pastor A*). Your name and church name or names will not be referenced, and any name you mention will be changed to keep replies anonymous, however, depending on your responses conceivably someone might be able to deduce who the pastor I am speaking of is.

Please Note That:

1. Our interview will be audio recorded and the recording will be transferred to and kept only on my personal home computer which is password protected.
2. Care has been taken that the questions asked to participants will cause you no harm. However, should you feel at any time during the interview that a question is in any way potentially or actually harmful to you please mention it and we will skip that question.
3. Additionally you can discontinue or drop out of this research project at any time without any penalty.

No further effort will be made to contact you in the future. The final survey results will be available for those who have completed the survey upon request by emailing twehrlich@aol.com or by sending a written request to

Timothy Ehrlich
13400 Park Blvd.
Seminole, FL 33776

Name

Date

APPENDIX E

CRITICAL SPIRITUAL INCIDENTS RELATED TO CALLING

Pastor A: “I was praying and I felt God pinning me down. Actually pressing me down and I heard him say, ‘I have something special I want you to do. Will you do it?’”

Pastor B: “I had been turned down from a school I wanted to attend. I was sitting on the beach at sunset and I heard the words: ‘I want you to be a preacher!’”

Pastor C: “I was feeling called but I didn’t really understand what that meant. I was praying about it and I heard a whisper: ‘What gives you joy?’ I said ‘Helping young people know Christ.’ Then I knew what I was called to do.”

Pastor D: “I agreed to lead the youth group at my church I prayed for God to help me and I felt God saying to me, ‘You ought to be a preacher.’ A few weeks later I heard a sermon that spoke right to me and confirmed my calling.”

Pastor E: “I was sitting out under the stars looking at them. Suddenly I felt God’s presence and it all disappeared; everything disappeared. It happened three times and the third time I gave myself to God.”

Pastor F: “I was 17. I was sitting in church with my family—my mom and dad and my brother. Suddenly I heard a voice saying, ‘[A], I want you to be one of my pastors.’ I looked around to see who was behind me that would have said that but no one was there.”

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