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# CONGREGATIONS AS “MULTIVOCAL” MENTORING ENVIRONMENTS: COMPARATIVE RESEARCH AMONG THREE PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS

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## Abstract

Despite churches' ongoing concerns about clergy shortages and shrinking enrollments in Protestant seminaries, little research has been conducted that examines how and why individuals choose a pastoral vocation. In this study, we explore how congregations act as mentoring environments for aspiring ministers. Theoretically, we engage work on mentoring from scholars of organizational behavior as well as Willimon's notion of the “multivocal” nature of the pastoral calling. Specifically, we conduct an in-depth study of three congregations (one Southern Baptist, one Episcopal, and one Christian Methodist Episcopal) that were identified by denominational leaders for nurturing a high number of persons into the role of clergy over the previous ten years. We find that, although they differ in denominational heritage, worship style, polity, and socioeconomic status, these successful mentoring congregations have key features in common. In all three congregations, paid staff and lay leaders were intentional about identifying and encouraging aspiring ministers. These congregations also found ways to balance in-reach with outreach, inviting theological struggle and providing answers, and making the ministerial vocation appear accessible and set apart.

## Introduction

Previous research on religious congregations has focused on churches' institutional characteristics or their relationship to local contexts.<sup>1</sup> Studies of congregational

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<sup>1</sup> See Dean R. Hoge and David Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950–1978* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979); Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway, eds., *Church and Denominational Growth* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon

leadership tend to explore the impact of dimensions such as gender, satisfaction, or effectiveness in relation to current job role.<sup>2</sup> More recent work examines why pastors leave local church ministry.<sup>3</sup> Little research, however, investigates how and why individuals choose a pastoral vocation in the first place. And whereas culture has been described and analyzed as an important component of congregational life,<sup>4</sup> only one recent study<sup>5</sup> examines congregations as mentoring cultures for future ordained pastoral leaders.

Auburn Seminary's study of North American theological school enrollment trends<sup>6</sup> concluded that fewer persons, especially younger persons, aspire to the pastorate. In fact, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) found modest but steady declines in enrollment across all Protestant seminaries from 2005 to 2011. According to the

Press, 1993); Mark Chaves, *How Do We Worship?* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 1999); Nancy L. Eiesland, *A Particular Place: Urban Structuring and Religious Ecology in a Southern Exurb* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Press, 2001); Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas M. Gannon, "The Impact of Structural Differences on the Catholic Clergy," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18 (1979): 350–62; Hoge et al., "Changes in Satisfaction and Institutional Attitudes of Catholic Priests, 1970–1993," *Sociology of Religion* 56 (1995): 195–213; Edward C. Lehman, *Woman Clergy: Breaking Through Gender Barriers* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1993); Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Elaine McDuff, "The Gender Paradox in Work Satisfaction and the Protestant Clergy," *Sociology of Religion* 62 (2001): 1–21.

<sup>3</sup> See Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> See Nancy T. Ammerman, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1998); Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregations and Community* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence, "Congregations as Mentoring Environments," *Review of Religious Research* 47 (2006): 312–13.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara G. Wheeler and Anthony T. Ruger, "Sobering Figures Point to Overall Enrollment Decline," *In Trust* (Spring 2013): 5–11.

ATS report,<sup>7</sup> proportionate declines among younger (20- to 29-year-old) seminarians, as well as decreasing vocational interest in the ordained pastoral ministry, raises the question for denominations and religious bodies: Why have we been ineffective in recruiting our own youth and young adults to ministry?

The purpose of this research is to pose the above question in the positive: Why are some churches especially effective at recruiting and encouraging people to enter ministry? Theoretically, we engage the work of Willimon<sup>8</sup> on the multivocal nature of the pastoral calling, Parks and Daloz et al.,<sup>9</sup> on the characteristics of mentoring environments, and Fisher and Alford<sup>10</sup> on dynamic organizational cultures. Methodologically, we utilize ethnographic data from Episcopal, Southern Baptist, and Christian Methodist Episcopal churches in Alabama. Features of congregational cultures that evoke and nurture ministerial calling are explored across three exemplary congregations that have been successful at mentoring aspiring clergy.

## Ministerial Calling and Mentoring Environments

Willimon<sup>11</sup> describes the Christian minister's calling as multivocal. Pastoral calling, he argues, arises "from above" as a gift from God/the Holy Spirit and "from below" as a response to the needs and expectations of the congregation. The aspiring minister does not only discern the call through

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<sup>7</sup>Barbara G. Wheeler, Sharon W. Miller, and Daniel O. Aleshire, "How Are We Doing? The Effectiveness of Theological Schools as Measured by the Vocations and Views of Graduates," *Auburn Studies* 13 (2012): 1–32.

<sup>8</sup> See William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> See Laurent Parks Daloz et al., *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Caroline J. Fisher and Randall J. Alford, "Consulting on Culture: A New Bottom Line," *Consulting Psychology Journal* 52 (2000): 206–17.

<sup>11</sup> See Willimon.

isolated introspection or a message from God. While such experiences contribute to the discernment process, other voices are always present that help affirm, clarify, or test the inner voice or divine revelation. Congregations serve as a key source for mentors who can help potential ministers make sense of the various callings and voices they hear. But congregations are more than collections of religious individuals; they also speak with a powerful corporate voice. Given the multivocal nature of calling, congregations have a unique role in helping ministerial aspirants negotiate tensions between this world and the world beyond, through a double process of individual and corporate discernment.

While the individual process of calling and discernment is well researched, less is known about how congregations call ministers. Why are some congregations more effective at nurturing a call to ministry? Currently, no theoretical framework specifically addresses the mentoring role of congregations, but research from other areas provides key insights. Laurent Parks Daloz's work on the nature and character of mentorship and Sharon Daloz Parks's research on young adult development led to a major qualitative study of "committed lives" among Americans.<sup>12</sup> Interviews of a stratified sample of 145 adults uncovered not only the well-recognized role of individual mentors in the lives of contemporary adults who exhibit moral, ethical, and vocational commitment but also that of mentoring environments.<sup>13</sup> Mentoring environments are local subcultures where individual mentoring flourishes. The most effective of these subculture are characterized by the active presence of mentors, shared experience with a diverse group of friends and colleagues, and the availability of educational, practical, and technical resources for deepening knowledge and skill.<sup>14</sup> In the best of such environments, individuals are sometimes drawn into

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<sup>12</sup> See Daloz et al.

<sup>13</sup> See Daloz et al., 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Daloz et al., 46.

mentoring relationships without ever recognizing them as such. Mentoring is “in the air.”

According to Parks,<sup>15</sup> effective mentoring environments—those that promote personal maturity, ethical strength, and vocational commitment among emerging adults—tend to do certain things well. They (1) create a network of belonging; (2) entertain “big-enough” questions that challenge in a context of relative safety; (3) encourage encounters with and appreciation of religious or cultural others; (4) nurture important habits of mind and “worthy dreams”; and (5) provide access to key images, concepts, and practices that reinforce such environments. Mentoring environments are *committed*: they are cohesive and stable enough. They are *connected*: they are internally flexible and/or externally adaptable enough. They are *consistent*: they are predictable and safe enough. And they are *challenging*: they are innovative and involved enough. Thus, effective mentoring environments cross certain thresholds of functionality (they are “enough” in each of these four areas), but these thresholds cluster in pairs that work in dynamic tension (committed vs. connected; consistent vs. challenging). Too much of one characteristic might make an organization not “enough” of its opposite. A very stable environment (committed) might not be internally flexible or externally adaptable enough (connected).

Moreover, the organizational literature reflects similar findings: robust organizational cultures are characterized by the tension (and balance) between stability and flexibility; they are cultures of creative paradox.<sup>16</sup> Such organizations know who they are and they have clear corporate identities,

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<sup>15</sup> Parks, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline J. Fisher and Randall J. Alford, “Consulting on Culture: A New Bottom Line,” 206–217; Matthew Juechter, Caroline Fisher, and Randall Alford, “Five Conditions for High-Performance Cultures,” *Training and Development* 52 (1988): 63–67; Daniel R. Denison and W.S. Neale, *Denison Organizational Culture Survey: Facilitators Guide* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Aviat, 1996); Denison, *Corporate Culture and Organizational Effectiveness* (New York: Wiley, 1990); “Bringing Corporate Culture to the Bottom Line,” *Organizational Dynamics* 13 (1984): 4–22; Daloz et al., *Common Fire*.

but they are also flexible and responsive to internal and external challenges. They are challenging enough to initiate struggle but safe enough to invite creative risks.

To date, the only exploration of congregations as mentoring environments can be found in the Congregations as Mentoring Environments (CAME) study, conducted from 2003–2006 by the Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence (RCPE). CAME was a two-part study. Part One involved a survey of church leaders from 113 churches across three diverse Alabama denominations (Episcopal, Southern Baptist (SBC), and Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME)). Part Two was an in-depth study of three exemplary congregations from these denominations. Previously published<sup>17</sup> findings from Part One are summarized below. This article is based on the case studies from Part Two.

The CAME survey found that congregations with more paid staff—even after controlling for church size—were more likely to mentor aspiring clergy. Churches that offered special groups or mentoring were also more likely to nurture or sponsor candidates for ordination, regardless of membership size and number of staff. In addition, the survey showed that mentoring congregations tend to combine “inviting questions and struggle” with “providing answers and support.” Effective mentoring congregations struck balanced, rather than extreme, positions on concerns that are historically important for their specific denomination. The Episcopal Church, with a recent history of contested political issues, favors mentoring cultures that avoid extremes on inclusiveness concerns. For the SBC, mentoring churches are more likely to balance an evangelistic focus with social justice concerns. The CME, with a strong human and civil rights heritage, favors mentoring cultures that address sociopolitical concerns but without allowing them to dominate congregational life.

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<sup>17</sup> Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence, “Congregations as Mentoring Environments,” *Review of Religious Research* 47 (2006): 312–313.

Putting these findings from the CAME survey in conversation with the organizational theory described earlier strongly suggests that successful mentoring congregations balance potentially conflicting interests in ways that create an internal dynamism. The challenge of being both “this and that,” rather than settling for “either/or,” unleashes creative energies that draw people into work. This dynamism might help explain how mentoring congregations attract or develop aspiring ministers in the first place. Further, the tendency of mentoring congregations to invite questions and struggle while at the same time providing answers and support indicates that these congregations are committed to the process of nurturing the potential clergy they attract.

The CAME survey provided a wide-angle snapshot of congregations as mentoring environments, one that is consonant with previous research on mentoring. The case study portion of the CAME study, which supplies the data for this article, offers several advantages. First, mentoring environments can be examined in context. Understanding the unique features of each congregation’s history and setting helps to highlight themes that emerge across contexts, as well as isolating particular strengths and weaknesses that are unlikely to be replicable. Second, in-depth qualitative research captures the perspectives of mentors and mentees, clergy and laypersons, and puts these perspectives in dialogue with one another. Third, mentoring in progress can be observed, accounting for the physical structures, social networks, rituals, and programs that facilitate or hinder mentoring. A case study approach fleshes out the research on congregations as mentoring environments and makes it more conversant with theological perspectives on calling and religious leadership.

Based on the theory outlined above and findings from the RCPE study, we expect our mentoring congregations to attain certain thresholds of functionality. They have to be committed, connected, consistent, and challenging enough. Indeed, because these congregations are proven mentoring

environments, they help to specify the thresholds of competence in these areas. Additionally, we expect these congregations to exhibit organizational dynamism characterized by balancing internal and external stability and flexibility, including denominational features. Finally, the calling stories embedded in these case studies will reflect the influence of many voices, and especially highlight the role of the congregation in the multivocality of pastoral calling.

## Methods

In 2003, we began our research by identifying three denominations, each of which is representative of an important tradition within American Protestantism:<sup>18</sup> a mainline Protestant denomination (the Episcopal Church), a conservative Protestant denomination (Southern Baptist Convention or SBC), and a historically black Protestant denomination (Christian Methodist Episcopal or CME). We approached local judicatory leaders in the metropolitan Birmingham area for nominations of congregations that were objectively successful in nurturing ministerial candidates over the last ten years. One congregation from each denomination was recruited for a two-year, in-depth study that included interviewing members and former members who were currently in ministry or working toward ministerial credentials; conducting focus groups or individual interviews with identified mentors within the congregation; and engaging in participant observation of regular congregational rituals or programs.

Three congregations, St. Mary's Episcopal, Rehobeth Baptist (RBC), and Southridge CME were nominated, and each agreed to participate in the study. Though we prescribed no congregational size parameters to the

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<sup>18</sup> See Brian Steensland et al., "The Measure of American Religion: Toward Improving the State of the Art," *Social Forces* 79 (2000): 291–318.



adjudicatory leaders, all three nominated congregations were between 350 and 400 members.

After congregations agreed to participate, the study principal met with pastoral and other church leaders to identify and locate all persons from their congregation who were currently pursuing a ministerial vocation or who had in the past ten years. From those lists, two field researchers interviewed five mentees from St. Mary's Episcopal, eight from RBC, and three from Southridge CME. In the interviews, mentees were also asked to identify important individuals or groups in the participant congregation who served as mentors in their call to ministry. Field researchers then identified and conducted structured interviews with those individuals or groups; seven from St. Mary's, ten from RBC, and six from Southridge. Interview schedules are available as Appendices A and B.

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed and systematically analyzed for recurrent themes. The names of congregations and interviewees have been changed to protect the privacy of participants. Note that all mentees mentioned below are in various stages of what their denomination would define as pursuing a ministerial vocation; they are all, in their own context, clergy. The mentors, however, include both clergy and laypersons. Below we offer detailed case vignettes of each congregation, highlighting key images, concepts, and practices related to the congregation as a mentoring environment.

### **St. Mary's Episcopal Church**

Large houses with sprawling lawns evoke a sense of at-ease affluence in the old ex-urban community surrounding St. Mary's Episcopal Church. St. Mary's and its community stand out from the cookie-cutter subdivisions, malls, and big-box stores that surround them. Appropriate to its bucolic setting, St. Mary's resembles a small abbey. The congregation's peaceful appearance belies this highly active church, sponsoring multiple ministries and mentoring

several individuals into ordained parish ministry. The congregation maintains its organizational fervor by dynamically balancing internal and external forces. It is countercultural, but without rejecting the denominational and social resources available to it. It engages a needy world in a way that facilitates introspection, moving parishioners continually between spiritual growth and spiritual service. Individuals called to ordained ministry find in St. Mary's a supportive and challenging community. And all of this work happens in a way that seems haphazardly informal.

*We Are All Children of God*

The worship service at St. Mary's is a great balancing act. Transitional cues such as a bell, musical shifts, processions, and recessions move the service between informal chatter and formal liturgy. The worship space conveys transcendence (with high ceilings, dramatic lighting, and gilded symbols) and accessibility (flat and circular space, entrance not oriented toward the altar). The construction of both service and space is intentional, reflecting some of the most deeply held values at St. Mary's.

One parishioner says, "St. Mary's is a friendly, welcoming community, committed to Jesus Christ and to the idea that we are all children of God."<sup>19</sup> The emphasis is neither exclusively on the "children" nor on "God," but the worshiping community comprised in the phrase. It is this concept that all are the children of God, with something to contribute to the life and worship of the church, which is core to St. Mary's identity. The flat worship space levels the clergy and congregation, while also making the space accessible to people with mobility disabilities. The circular space unites clergy and congregants, especially during Communion when the congregation stands in a circle and the clergy move into the circle to distribute the elements. "Our worship atmosphere is more casual than some

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<sup>19</sup> All interviews referred to in this text were conducted at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Birmingham, Ala., March 2004–October 2004.

churches,” says one member. St. Mary’s refuses to choose between clergy-centered, awe-inspiring worship and more participatory and inclusive worship. Members’ comfort with informality makes it easier to accomplish the constant shifting necessary to emphasize equally the disparate aspects of worship.

Outside of Sunday worship, individual members participate in children’s homes and soup kitchens, work with the disabled and the elderly, and volunteer with Habitat for Humanity and other social justice organizations. Indeed, the amount of outreach performed by the church is never immediately evident because most of it is not centrally controlled but ad-hoc and entrepreneurial, following the interests of individual members. Significant in-reach is also taking place, including assisting with worship, serving church members’ emotional and physical needs, and educational group meetings. A key feature of ministry at St. Mary’s is how outreach activity and congregational nurture are often linked. One member explains:

It is important to have a mechanism to organize small groups and process the ministry—recognize where Jesus is and isn’t. Church members should learn a different way of “being Christ-like.” Today people are so concerned with individual and personal freedoms. Mentoring churches should help people see that being in a lifestyle of emptying brings fulfillment, living that way together. A church has to be community first.

The culture of linking the inward and outward journey goes back at least twenty years to the previous rector, Michael Ring, who used small-group discussions to challenge members to look inside themselves and outside at the needs of the world. One member recalls this time: “There were a lot of shared experiences. There were thematic, informal small groups. Wednesday night Eucharist with conversations following, a Sunday night group that met

explored personal journeys. We asked each other, ‘How is the gospel working out in your work place?’”

*We All Have a Ministry and We’re Going to Find That, for Everyone*

What makes St. Mary’s a good mentoring environment? A longtime member says, “A church mentors those called to any form of service by helping them identify the call and enabling them [to] find their own way of responding, a community that offers opportunities for many kinds of service and helps members find their own ways of serving is a mentoring environment.” One minister who interned at St. Mary’s said the identity of the church was crucial to its mentoring culture: “[A church has to] have the DNA within the body that that’s who we are, that’s what we are about . . . we all have a ministry and we’re going to find that, for everyone.”

The current rector’s leadership style is crucial. Another minister, who received her training at St. Mary’s and still retains a close relationship with the church, says, “Rachel [the current rector] is slow to legislate, and people feel ownership.” A member of the church adds, “She pays attention to people. She is very quick to recognize what they are good at. Her refusal to play the star helps demystify the role of rector and make[s] it appear to be something attainable by others.” A lay leader says, “She is open to any ministry that anybody wants to get involved in and offers encouragement and support. She lets those people be the ones to head up that ministry. She does not have a need to be in charge of everything.”

Lay leaders in the church also play important roles in fostering the expectation that members will be involved in ministry and ensuring that such opportunities are easily accessible. One lay leader expresses it this way:

The congregation as a whole is receptive to new ideas and getting involved in outreach and starting and sustaining ministries. . . . If you are interested in something that is going on, you can easily find out

who to get in contact with. If you are interested in starting a ministry, you know you are not going to be shot down . . . you will find someone who is willing to listen and somebody to put you in touch with the right people.

Another longtime member and lay leader says that although she tends to think of her work at the church as related to “practical things,” she does admit that she’s doing something more than simply “looking for help.” She is also “hoping to get folks to try new roles that maybe they’d not seen themselves taking on.” After almost twenty years at St. Mary’s, she concludes, “I’ve seen that taking an active, physical role in the life of the church helps tremendously to increase folks’ spiritual commitment. If trying to put people to work is mentoring, then maybe I’m a mentor.”

#### *We Love These People*

Among those “sucked into the Body of Christ” (as one younger member put it) at St. Mary’s are several individuals who have moved into ordained ministries. In every case, these individuals realized a call to ministry as an adult and were already involved in another career. Those who were mentored as well as the people they identified as mentors described St. Mary’s as a place where aspiring clergy can struggle with their call, practice ministry, and receive support and encouragement.

The stories of Sharon Sun and Betty Sims illustrate many of the features typical of St. Mary’s mentees. Sharon had a high-paying job but decided to take early retirement to care for her ailing mother. At St. Mary’s, she was encouraged to struggle with her calling during this transitional period. “Spiritual growth includes questioning, doubt, rethinking of positions. [St. Mary’s] creates an environment conducive to those who want to follow their personal journey into seminary studies.” She began taking classes at a local seminary and eventually was asked by a professor to help fill in by preaching at a local parish that lacked a full-time priest. She loved the experience. “Rachel

[the current rector] is the one who said to me [your experience with preaching] sounds like a call to the ordained ministry...and I said fine, if this is what I have to do, I will do it.”

Betty Sims began her journey toward ministry elsewhere but eventually found her way to St. Mary's. After retiring from a successful career in higher education, Betty was unfulfilled. “I felt like I had tried everything but that wasn't it.” She entered a discernment process and felt called to the priesthood. Though she was approved by the bishop's committee to go to seminary, she experienced “a lot of public opposition, persecution, really.” While at seminary, she was advised to do her fieldwork at St. Mary's, because of its welcoming reputation and experience with a female rector. She says of her time at St. Mary's, “the female rector was a good fit and [the parishioners] all wanted to help me too. Rachel [the rector] was open to my ideas...she involved me in decisions...she let me preach...I felt respected.” Betty now serves at a nearby parish and maintains a close relationship with friends at St. Mary's.

St. Mary's offers mentees a unique environment in which to practice because the busy ministry schedule provides multiple opportunities, the small staff is willing (even eager) to share leadership with them, and the members believe mentees have important gifts to share. One former intern said of her time at St. Mary's, “I got to help in many ways; I felt respected.” All the mentored individuals expressed how much they appreciated the words of encouragement, phone calls, letters, and financial support that St. Mary's offered them. “This may sound a little silly,” one lay leader says, “but we love these people [mentees]. I think they are surrounded by our love. St. Mary's is a loving community but the people called to ministry are loved in a special way, which I find hard to put into words.” She added, “[The members of St. Mary's] are my family. They are a constant source of support and encouragement. They make me feel like I can do anything, and deal with any adversity.”

St. Mary's exhibits many of the expected elements of a mentoring environment. The church has a stable identity, evident by the number of members who could articulate some formulation of "that's just who we are"; the church is *committed enough*. But, far from being rigid, the identity is in many ways defined by maintaining tensions. St. Mary balances denominational hierarchy and liturgical transcendence with a worship space and ritual that puts everyone on equal footing before God. Clergy and laypersons alike are also intentional about moving, almost rhythmically, between "going out" to serve the world and "staying in" for reflection; St. Mary is *connected enough*. Additionally, the combination of the conviction that everyone has something to offer, the need for all hands on deck to do the work of the church, and the empowering attitude of the church leaders makes St. Mary's *challenging enough*. Finally, St. Mary is *consistent enough* as aspiring ministers are invited to struggle and question their calling in a supportive environment.

### **Rehobeth Baptist Church**

RBC is a post-war, baby boom congregation situated in an older suburb east of downtown Birmingham. Neighborhoods of smaller homes are bisected by a commercial thoroughfare dotted with strip malls, storefront churches, ethnic restaurants, fast-food joints, and pawn shops. In contrast, Rehobeth is an imposing structure. Built in late-seventies' amphitheater style, the bricked external façade of the sanctuary is nearly fifty feet tall. Five arched windows soar above a tiered balcony and offer the only natural light inside. A large foyer provides a buffer zone for members to socialize. The worship space itself is accessed through a cordon of double doors above which is inscribed, "'As My Father Hath Sent Me, So I Have Sent You.' John 20:21." What first seems like a directional miscue is in fact an apt reflection of the congregation's mentoring culture. Many churches employ "sending" Scriptures above the exits for people to read as they leave; RBC intentionally reverses

that direction. The community of faith equips those who are sent.

Sunday services retain a traditional Baptist structure with a welcome, followed by hymns with a sprinkling of praise choruses, a testimony, and an offering. All of this activity is preparatory for the pastor's sermon. At RBC, the pastor and pulpit are front and center; all aisles lead to the stage where the pastor in suit and tie preaches enthusiastically in front of a small orchestra and a robed choir. Above it all is a very large, back-lit cross that softly illuminates the baptistery. The verticality of the space and the centrality of the pulpit and pastor provide visual counterweights to RBC's congregational polity and lower-church ritual, and offer tangible images and opportunities for the exercise of pastoral leadership.

#### *Home Is Where the Heart Is*

In tension with the scope and structure of the worship space is the intimacy claimed among members. The official motto of the church is "RBC: A Home for Your Heart." All interviewees described Rehobeth as "friendly, family-feeling with a quickly accepting fellowship." "You don't have to be here a long time," one staff member noted, "to feel like you're at home already." This hospitality is more than simply good southern manners; it is an extension of the biblical mandate to evangelize and "make disciples."<sup>20</sup>

For the most committed, the connection to the church family is forged in the nuclear family hearth. The current youth pastor, a former mentee at Rehobeth who now mentors other young persons, describes the process in this way:

My earliest memory of the church, I would say, is my earliest memory, period. I grew up and my parents were very devoted to the Lord from the earliest age that I can remember. . . . And so, my

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<sup>20</sup> All interviews referred to in this section were conducted at Ridgecrest Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala., March 2003–May 2003.



earliest memories would be just those of doing summer camp, children's camp, and going on [mission] trips, and sitting in Sunday school . . . and then, of course, growing up with friends and making friends at church. . . . At home, we prayed together and talked about the Lord, and at a very early age, I can remember having devotionals [at home].

The call to ministry is not only nurtured through a variety of church activities but also through the practical example of staff mentors and family. The congregation *as* home and its influence *at* home are the incubators of aspiring ministers' "heart" for ministry, and eventually perhaps, a calling and career.

#### *A Tale of Two Brothers*

Conrad and Jamie Duncan grew up at Rehobeth, and both of them became ministers. Like the majority of RBC mentees, they "received Christ as [their] Savior" as children—Conrad at twelve and Jamie, the younger brother by five years, at eight. It was not until he was seventeen years old that Conrad felt the "call to ministry." At a youth conference, "God just really dealt with me . . . but I was real anxious about it." An adult leader from another congregation sought Conrad out and encouraged him to accept God's special call. Back home, Conrad got additional support from his pastor. But it was an invitation to preach at RBC that eventually clinched his decision.

Conrad's brother, Jamie, began to question his early Christian commitment when he was about fifteen years old. He sought out his pastor for counseling as well as "Brother Jimmy," the longtime minister of music at RBC. Then, after a mission trip to Missouri, Jamie said, "I just heard the Lord clear as a bell tell me . . . 'Jamie, it's time to settle this issue of doubting, and it's time for you to trust me completely with your life and your heart,' and so that night that's what I did."

Conrad's period of doubt came in college. "I got, um, away from home," he confesses, "away from rules, you know, I guess I thought I was going to have some freedom." But he ended up in an empty dorm room with no friends and was feeling very lonely. "I looked up at all the shelf space and there was one book . . . it was my Bible. It was like God said, 'Now, it's just me and you.'" So Conrad got involved with a Baptist church near his college, and the associate pastor there became a critical mentor. Conrad remembers:

[He] was the one that mentored me and really took me under his wing and taught me how to be honest with God . . . he would hold me accountable, in a loving way. He would be firm with me in times when I needed firmness, but there [were] times also that he was very merciful, and very grace-giving to me, to help me kind of bloom, I guess.

An important part of a mentoring environment, RBC mentees agree, is the support of the congregation when young ministers fail as well as when they succeed. It's a mentoring culture that allows just enough but not too much room to struggle—providing support when decisions seem difficult and challenge when mentees need it, whether they know it (yet) or not.

After his period of early struggle, Jamie spent time with Conrad and his pastor/mentor. Jamie says, "I just began to feel the Lord nudging at my heart toward what he wanted to do with my life . . ." Spending weekends and going on a "couple of mission trips" with Conrad and his mentor, "kind of formed my thinking a little bit, they gave me a taste, anyway, of ministry." But the "battle" that was going on "in my mind and in my heart," was that "I didn't want to be like my brother." So Jamie talked to his RBC youth minister, two friends who were also considering ministry, and again, Brother Jimmy his music minister. But the most decisive conversation was with his brother. He remembers:

We were just together one day, and I asked him, you know, how do you know if you're really called

to serve the Lord in full-time ministry, because everybody's called to ministry? I knew that, but what does it mean, and how do I know? And he said [that], you know, for him that it was this idea that...you can't imagine yourself being in the center of God's will and doing anything else.

Jamie concludes, "And, you know, I really prayed about that hard and I couldn't see myself anywhere else except in ministry." For Conrad and Jamie, the calling was truly multivocal<sup>21</sup>—a listening to and weighing of their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences as well as those of staff ministers, friends, family, and the clear voice of the Lord.

### *They Help You Hear God's Call*

Mentees at Rehobeth identified a wide range of mentors, including ordained staff and laity. One mentee reiterates that RBC is "larger than a typical-sized church in the Southern Baptist Convention" but "it's got the feel of a small church." He explains:

[I]t's a really good thing, especially growing up because [my] mentors were very many people from Sunday School teachers to discipleship leaders and the parents of other kids that I hung around with. . . I can remember receiving notes from people, people calling me, people visiting our house, and saying we want you to know that we're praying for you, we support you, and we're here for you. You know, and so those things gave me support, and it took away the fear of going into the unknown.

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<sup>21</sup> The multivocality of calling that Willimon theorizes is clearly observed in the RBC case. See also a small study of Southern Baptist ministerial students at Baylor University. Among a sample of 217 (out of 868 total) students across a ten-year period (1990–1999), the top three factors that influenced a call to ministry were (1) the student's private Bible study and prayer; (2) opportunity for volunteer lay ministry experience in the student's congregation; and (3) the influence of Christian parents and a Christian home. (Basden, Jeter, "The Influence of Christian Parents and a Christian Home on Persons Who Respond to a Call to Vocational Christian Ministry," *Journal of Family Ministry* 14(1) (Spring 2000): 68–71.)

In addition to encouragement, Rehobeth provides special opportunities for aspiring ministers to lead and teach as well as preach. A previous pastor, Larry Nabors, was a key mentor for as many as five mentees. One of them, presently the youth minister at RBC, recalls:

[He] pulled us in . . . and we met with him for several months, every week. We'd come in and we'd meet with him and that was a tremendous mentoring time because it meant a lot to me as he taught us about ministry. And I'll be honest, I can't remember a lot of the things we learned in that class other than that I learned what a mentor was . . . and that I needed it.

The current pastor emphasizes the importance of networking in the Baptist tradition. Whenever he brings in a special speaker or a well-known pastor, he invites young ministers and their families to spend time with them, to “pick their brains and really talk to them.”

In a denomination with congregational polity that stresses the “priesthood of all believers,” intentional mentoring for pastoral ministry is seen as necessary. One father of an RBC mentee muses about the call to ministry and its relationship to vocation:

If you believe that God has a specific will for everyone, every Christian, then you couldn't say that the call to be in full-time ministry would be any different. . . . And at the same time, the career of being a pastor or a missionary seems, at least, from a human standpoint, to be a lot more serious.

A mother, also of another RBC mentee, describes her approach to the question of calling for her three Christian sons:

Well, our oldest son is not called into ministry, our middle two sons are. And, I know I was a lot more careful talking to them about their profession than I was my oldest . . . I cautioned them to be very careful—because I know that people have said things to them—and I told them that only God

could call you to that . . . Somebody might go be a banker and do O.K., and I don't think they have to be doing the will of God and might be O.K. and they could make a living. But you would be an absolute failure without knowing that God called you and was enabling you to be in ministry.

Current staff members at RBC are clear that the call to ministry is different and also difficult. The pastor explains:

The reason it's different is because it's a spiritual thing . . . You know, Paul was called; Jeremiah was called; Isaiah was called. Scripturally, it's there. The other side of that is that it better be there because sometimes the ministry can be so awful that you would never stay unless you were called.

"At RBC," one young mentee concludes, "I started learning how to hear and determine God's voice. And, of course you don't hear him audibly, you know, like in the movies... But, of course, you hear him speaking to your heart."

RBC is a mentoring environment that is committed and connected enough. It is "home," an extended family for its members and their families. But it is not isolated from the world around it—for the "heart" of RBC is its corporate calling to disciple and evangelize. The majority of activities at RBC revolve around Bible study, evangelism, and missions. Members and prospects are sent into the womb of congregational life to be disciplined and then to realize, claim, and exercise their gifts for ministry in the church and wider community. And while all members understand themselves to be Christians and ministers, some recognize themselves and are recognized by others as called to a more serious vocation role.

In the Baptist tradition, the path to ordination is less routinized, which can make discernment for the special calling to pastoral ministry lonely and confusing. As a result, Rehobeth works intentionally to provide support and challenge to young and aspiring ministers. Opportunities are provided to preach, lead, and participate in discernment with others God has "nudged," and space is offered to

struggle with the gravity of the task. Everyone gets involved in the conversation, from paid staff (not just the senior pastor) to laity, from family members to visiting denominational leaders. Even the architectural structure and the ritual flow of worship conspire to draw young and aspiring men at RBC out of the congregational family, up into pastoral leadership, and out into the world in ministry and mission.

### **Southridge Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME)**

Paintings of former bishops, pastors, and stewards line the hallways of Southridge CME. In the main conference room, black-and-white photographs of the groundbreaking are situated in a glass display case—more evidence that this is a church that is proud of its rich and long history. Founded in downtown Birmingham during the early twentieth century, Southridge now stands in a predominantly African American, middle-class suburb. One of the larger churches (among many) along a main thoroughfare, the church is surrounded by modestly sized houses and a sprinkling of small businesses.

A typical worship experience at Southridge begins outside the doors of the sanctuary, where younger children enthusiastically hand out orders of worship. Older children and teens lead congregational prayers and read Scripture. One Sunday, after a young man stumbled through a reading, the pastor jumped to the pulpit to congratulate him on his first time to read Scripture in public and call for applause from the audience (who responded enthusiastically).

The senior-adult choir has a prominent place on the stage and in the worship order, and the sermon is occasionally delivered by an elderly minister. Clapping and movement are encouraged from the leaders on the stage and the congregants. Worshipers eagerly seek out visitors to take under their wings, suggesting by their motions, smiles, and nods the appropriate postures for the service.

The worship experience gives tantalizing hints as to why this church is an effective mentoring environment: young and old alike play important roles in the service. Sermonic and musical themes celebrate God's work among his people, especially how participating in God's work offers purpose and direction. Otherworldly benefits await God's people in the future and in the present, offering strength for today and a welcome escape from suffering tomorrow.

*When It Happens to One, It Happens to All*

Southridge members are eager to discuss the gregarious spirit that pervades the church. A longtime member describes the culture: "One thing that I feel good about this church is that when it happens to one, it happens to all. All you have to do is make a phone call, and say, 'Hey, Miss So-and-So need our help,' and everybody is on it<sup>22</sup>." An important element to Southridge's concept of family is that it is rarely bounded by status. A minister who was mentored in the congregation credits the leadership of a former pastor in making sure Southridge has remained egalitarian.

He didn't overlook anyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Someone who scrubbed floors for a living was just as important as a doctor or a lawyer to him. Everyone's opinion was important, regardless of if they held a position in the church or not. The members who just sat in the pew on every Sunday were just as important as those who were at board meetings.

A former pastor describes Southridge: "I think it was a small environment that made us feel like we were family but yet we were large enough to be recognized as a very valuable church in the community." One of the great strengths of Southridge is the church's ability, over a long period of time, to balance its intimate family atmosphere with an active community presence and reputation. Southridge has long enjoyed the favor of local bishops and

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<sup>22</sup> All interviews referred to in this section were conducted at Southridge CME Church, Birmingham, Ala., November 2004–December 2004.

other denominational officials. Several of the ministers who were mentored at Southridge said the bishop specifically assigned them there. Bishops and other CME officials frequent Southridge's worship services.

In addition to denominational favor, Southridge is known in the community for the activities taking place at the church. One member summed up the church's outreach efforts as a natural extension of the church's activities. "You know a lot of times, like if I'm somewhere, I'm always talking about what's going on at the church, what we're doing, how we did a certain thing, and what a success it was, and people say, 'There's always something going on at your church and I'm going over there to see.' Eventually, they'll come."

#### *A Unique Experience as a CME Church*

When asked for reasons why Southridge is an effective mentoring environment, lay leaders were quick to point out some ways that Southridge is unusual among CME churches. First, the church has parlayed its favor with the denominational hierarchy into unusually stable pastorates. One longtime member said, "Rev. L.L. Dion was the first pastor we had, I think, that stayed as long as 10 years. I don't know why the bishop would allow him to stay that long, but I know he did. Since that pastor, we have had two or three stay over 15 years." Several members agreed that the longer-term pastors contributed greatly to the church's strong mentoring identity and family atmosphere.

One of the first long-term ministers, C.B. Frances, worked to involve young men in leadership. An older member, who benefited from Frances's reforms, discusses their importance:

C.B. Frances was one of the early young mentors as far as I'm concerned.... See, for years and years we would have special days and one of the old brothers would be the chairman. But see C.B. Frances wanted that to change. C.B. Frances sort of wrapped his arm around us and when we had those



special days, he would want one of us younger men to be the chairman.

Johnny Watkins, yet another long-term pastor, was mentioned for his work to keep Southridge's developing leaders investing in Southridge, rather than building reputations by traveling to different churches (a common CME practice). A member discussed Watkins's reforms: "During his administration, he always wanted his officers at Southridge. He didn't go along with the idea of us attending anywhere else on Sunday mornings but Southridge. He said, 'I want my officers and teachers here.'"

Lay leaders lauded two other Southridge oddities that they say have contributed to the mentoring environment. First, the church has been a haven for women to enter the ministry. A leading member observed that Southridge has had "a unique experience as a CME church in nurturing and bringing up people who went into the ministry. And the thing that makes it most unique is that most of ours have been ladies." He continued, "Because the environment [at another church] or the attitude there suggested to them that they wasn't go'n to be able to be accepted into ministry . . . they would end up here."

Second, several ministers who received mentoring at Southridge found their way to Southridge because denominational leaders placed them there for the expressed purpose of grooming them for the ministry. One member commented on how the church's support and denominational favor aided mentees:

In the CME church and when you're getting into the ministry is that first of all this is a long, long, long drawn-out process unless you got somebody behind you like we was behind them or whatever. They skipped some steps, you know, because they were well trained and they didn't have to go through a lot of stuff because they were well trained.

*Come On, Ride With Me*

Mentoring takes place at Southridge at a number of levels. An important initial aspect of mentoring is identifying potential mentees. At Southridge, this is a natural part of the involving culture, as denominational leaders, laity, and clergy all help funnel people into service at Southridge. A longtime member discussed how she was drawn into church leadership: “I think Ms. Burke, my cousin, influenced me with being a stewardess in our church to serve there. [They] worked with communion and took it to the poor, and it’s just that they were always working trying to help, you know, somebody in the community or somebody in need.”

Once potential leaders are identified, more formal mentoring begins. Former pastor Watkins says that church leaders might provide extra reading materials or say, “Hey, I’d like for you to be my prayer partner” or “Hey, come on, ride with me” to upcoming workshops or church conferences. A lay leader in the church shared her story, which illustrates the mentoring process.

Reverend Watkins would always say, “When you coming to Sunday School? We haven’t been seeing you in Sunday School?” So finally I made up my mind one morning I was coming to Sunday School. When I kept coming, kept working, kept going and putting the books out in the classes and setting up the chairs every Sunday morning, finally that’s when Ms. Cain [lay leader] say, “Ms. Tyler, how would you like to be my Youth Department Superintendent?” And I say, “Me? Superintendent?” I was just like, “What?” I’m just like, “Why do you think I could even do something like that” and she said, “Yeah, you, think about it. I talked it over with the pastor.” . . . and that’s why I said, “Reverend Watkins, I cannot do what Ms. Cain does.” He said, “Just be you. Do what you can do and don’t try to be anybody else.” But Ms. Cain really, really put it in me, that confidence I guess. She put that

confidence in me about me being the Sunday School Superintendent ... and now, you know, me and her hanging together, right together doing everything, speaking, doing everything.

Once potential ministers were involved at Southridge, they had an opportunity to practice their gifts in a setting where they were free to make mistakes. One former mentee described the pastor who mentored him at Southridge: “He was very patient, and the type that allowed people to make mistakes, because many places you go, they don’t want you making mistakes.” Another former mentee described her experience of practicing ministry at Southridge.

In my blundering, they were very encouraging in the sense that “it’s go’n be alright baby, you just keep working on it.” I think that was it, just accepting me as who I was, and knowing that I haven’t arrived. That I was a work in process, and I still am... . That was it, the encouragement in spite of the mistakes, and being able to take me on like a child, in the sense that when I fall flat on my face, they would kind of pick me up.

Southridge mentors like a wise, patient, and nurturing parent, and mentees respond like mature, independent, but still appreciative children. A member related, “Yeah, we really, really rally around them, and they still feel like we are a part of them.” Another member shared an example: “[A former mentee] has been moved to a large church in Chicago, and every time she see us at conferences or where ever she go, [she says] ‘That’s my family ... I don’t care where I go, it will be nothing like Southridge.’”

We find that Southridge’s mentoring environment comprises many of the key elements observed in the previous two case studies. However, a few features of Southridge deserve special attention. First, unlike St. Mary’s or RBC, many of Southridge’s mentees came to Southridge from outside, rather than being “home grown.” This factor is strongly related to Southridge’s ability to maintain its own, family style identity while at the same time leveraging

denominational favor and resources. Southridge has made itself exceptional without being exclusive. Second, Southridge's mentoring culture has a long history, partially because of the unusually long-tenured pastorates the church has enjoyed but also because those pastors invested heavily in lay leadership. The lay leaders had clearly taken ownership of the church as a mentoring environment, such that aspiring ministers from other churches were either attracted to or sent by the denomination to Southridge in order to enjoy the supportive atmosphere. Third, the strong congregational component of the multivocal call to ministry is in evidence at Southridge. Several mentees mentioned how they first began to consider vocational ministry because a Southridge pastor or lay leader encouraged them to deploy their gifts and explore their calling. Moreover, the congregation's corporate voice was often called upon to support fledgling ministers, whether through vocal affirmation during a worship service or by pooling resources to aid aspiring clergy to attend conferences or seminary.

## Discussion

For these three SBC, Episcopal, and CME congregations, nurturing young and aspiring ministers is clearly a matter of ministry involvement and connection with clergy and lay mentors. Rich webs of mentoring are present in each case study congregation. Young and aspiring ministers at RBC are encouraged by parents, siblings, pastors, lay people, and peers. They are given special opportunities to hone ministerial skills, and they, in turn, mentor others. In many cases, young and aspiring ministers are hired by the congregation or by former ministers at their new churches. At St. Mary's, aspiring ministers become involved in congregational life through smaller discipleship and ministry groups; a nurturing (and also overlapping) web of clergy and laity quickens their vocation. A former rector and a longtime laywoman, for example, mentored several ministers, including the current

rector; the current rector and her lay mentees, in turn, are mentoring the next generation of Episcopal clergy. Whereas RBC is proud to mentor “homegrown” ministers, St. Mary’s, and especially Southridge, are recognized by judicatory leaders as places to send aspiring ministers for mentoring. The majority of mentees who came to Southridge did so from outside the congregation. The bishop recognizes and cultivates the mentoring environment at Southridge through the longer-term placement of notable pastors and the shorter-term placement of “minister trainees.”

Complementing the interpersonal mentoring networks, our three exemplary congregations draw upon and transform their own theological traditions to provide the “key images, concepts, and practices” that reinforce mentoring environments.<sup>23</sup> Though the language and trajectory of mentoring differs depending upon denominational polity and theology, each of the three churches we studied supplemented formal denominational tendencies with informal counterweights, which serve to simultaneously make the ministerial profession “set apart” and accessible. Here we see the dynamic interaction between tradition (the time-honored consistency of practice) and flexibility (challenge to, and even change in, the tradition).

For instance, against the backdrop of a congregational polity and with a conversionist soteriology, Rehobeth mentors emphasize and prepare young and aspiring ministers for the special call to ministry that only they, in the end, can and must hear. In the context of denominational turmoil, an increasingly consumerist laity, and the general erosion of religious authority, mentees are clear that this vocation is difficult, and only the support of realistic mentors and the certainty of divine sanction make it vocationally feasible.

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<sup>23</sup> See Parks, 2011.

While the mentoring environment at Rehobeth moves mentees out of the congregation and into the pulpit, the culture at St. Mary's moves the mentor down from the ranks of the hierarchy into the Eucharistic circle, in the words of a mentee, "demystifying" her. Here the mentee comes to vocation through immersion in a loving, involving, and spiritually invigorating community. Ordination is made accessible here—perhaps as a counter to a hierarchical denominational polity and a professionalized clergy. On the other hand, denominational soteriology is reflected in the deliberate diocesan process that this Episcopal congregation supports to guide candidates toward the priesthood.

Southridge CME, like Rehobeth Baptist, sets mentees on a particular professional ministry path, although without the spiritual angst. Due to the connectional polity of the denomination and Southridge's favored place in that system, the congregation itself claims a special calling as a mentoring environment. Typically, members with ministerial gifts are sent to Southridge by the bishop, given special opportunities for leadership, nurtured by clergy and laity at Southridge, and then moved quickly into the itinerant system. Southridge cultivates its lay leadership by creating internal positions that mirror the external hierarchy. These lay leaders, in turn, become an integral part of the explicit mentoring environment there. By making itself a highly valued and recognized incubator of new ministers, this congregation simultaneously co-opts and subverts the denominational hierarchy by keeping their own mentoring clergy longer and assisting mentees in shortcutting the formalized trainee process.

In all three congregations, the functional threshold between "enough" consistency and challenge in negotiating the task of nurturing new ministers is also "just enough." The most effective congregations as mentoring environments are somewhat liminal: they teach (and model) the ordinary via that which is outside of the ordinary. In a Baptist congregational culture where being set apart comes

less easily, they create a little hierarchy; in Episcopal culture where being set apart is more natural, they create a little democracy; and in a historic African American church culture where being set apart (and over against) is part of a sociocultural heritage, they practice a little cooptation of authority (and subversion).

What is also striking, and what tends to support Daloz, Parks, and colleagues' developmentally oriented approach, is the finding that inviting questions and supporting struggle marks all of these mentoring congregations.<sup>24</sup> Both the CAME survey and our qualitative evidence reinforce that mentoring cultures do this especially well.<sup>25</sup> And they do it, according to Parks and Fischer and Alford, in a dynamic, tensional balance.<sup>26</sup>

Calling is truly multivocal: it arises from the congregation, from below, and also from above, through the "nudging in my heart" (RBC), a process of spiritual revelation (St. Mary's), and a call confirmed in practice with, by, and for the church (Southridge). These cases reveal also that multivocality is a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Each congregation is notable for its culture of involvement. Southridge, RBC, and St. Mary's are not factories for the production of the ordained but families working together in the service of Christ. As Willimon also points out, a committed congregation will raise up its own leadership rather than the other way around. This kind of fulsome multivocality, finally, is paradoxical and creative. From a theological perspective, congregations as mentoring environments are kenotic. As one St. Mary's member concluded, "being in a lifestyle of emptying brings fulfillment"—much as doubt begets conviction, sacrifice begets plenty, and humility begets authority.

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<sup>24</sup> See Daloz et al., 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Resource Center, 312–13.

<sup>26</sup> See Parks; Fisher and Alford, 206–17.

## Implications for Congregations

What are the implications for congregations that want to create and nurture a mentoring environment for young and aspiring ministers? A number of things are possible: hiring staff members who are responsible for identifying and mentoring young and aspiring ministers; offering special classes or experiences (that intentionally balance support with challenge) for members who are interested in beginning more formal steps toward vocational ministry; calling attention to the unique and powerful role of laity in identifying and encouraging others who express or demonstrate ministerial interest, aptitude, or “spiritual quickening”; providing many and varied opportunities for those pursuing a ministerial vocation to participate in pastoral ministry, including worship leadership, pastoral care, mission and ministry, Christian education, and congregational administration; recognizing the official steps that young and aspiring ministers take along the way and celebrating those milestones publicly; actively promoting the congregation as a place for young and aspiring ministers to find intentional mentoring, instruction, and experience in pastoral practice in the conference, diocese, presbytery, association, or a divinity school or seminary; and continuing to nurture connections with ministers the congregation has launched (or had a hand in launching).

Most importantly, congregations that want to nurture a mentoring environment should look carefully at the less obvious ways that a congregational culture highlights the relationship between clergy and laity. If the tradition is more hierarchical and clergy are more liturgically distinct or separate, finding creative ways to decrease that gap and involve clergy with laity more intimately is recommended. As in the case of St. Mary’s Episcopal, clergy members intentionally “come among” the laity in a variety of ways, most prominently in the Eucharist. If a congregation’s tradition is more congregational and clergy are less distinct from laity in manner, dress, and liturgical position, then providing opportunities for laity to “come out” of the



congregation and “up” into the pulpit or into special kinds of pastoral leadership are important. If the denominational culture is somewhere in between as at Southridge, prospective ministers should be encouraged to “come along” with veteran clergy and experienced lay leaders to special church conferences and routine pastoral calls and also be invited to “come up” and share the sacred worship space reserved for “The Reverends.”

Finally, a congregation’s overall readiness for mentoring young and aspiring ministers depends upon (a) the level of its *commitment* to the task that is evident in formal and informal congregational documents and pronouncements, the allocation and use of staff time, and the investment of congregational funds; (b) the presence of a dynamic network of *connection* among clergy, laity, the community context, and the denomination that exposes and leverages a range of experiences and resources for gaining ministerial knowledge, practicing pastoral habits, and pursuing formal candidacy; (c) the provision of *consistent* and supportive counsel in safe spaces where young and aspiring ministers can ask big questions and dream worthy dreams; and (d) the cultivation of a climate of *challenge* that allows for and encourages risk taking and innovation on the part of the congregation and its ministerial novitiates for the sake of better hearing and responding to the Spirit of God.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While this study greatly enriched our understanding of congregations of mentoring environments, much work remains to be done. We examined only three American Protestant denominations. Though we expect many of our findings will apply across American Protestant traditions, different dynamics may be in place for Catholic and Orthodox churches or for churches in other parts of the world. In particular, the Catholic and Orthodox practice of restricting most clergy to a celibate lifestyle (and in most cases, limiting the priesthood to males) introduces additional barriers to entry into professional ministry.

Mentoring environments in these cases must be able to account for two major life decisions (family and career) at once.

One interesting feature of our research is that all three study congregations were medium-sized. Recall that these were the churches identified by local denominational leaders as exemplars of mentoring environments; they might have pointed us instead to larger or smaller churches. Is there something about medium-sized congregations that is conducive to mentoring? All three of our churches were large enough to have multiple paid staff members (though only two to four), something our earlier research indicated was important,<sup>27</sup> but still small enough that members of each congregation frequently referred to the family feel of the church. The churches were also large enough and busy enough to have multiple points of entry for prospective ministers. Although larger churches can provide even more paid staff and even more programming, they might not be as effective at creating the accepting, family atmosphere that gives mentees safe space to struggle and fail. Thus, larger churches might be less effective at mentoring new clergy per capita, or they might have altogether different models to compensate for their inevitably more professionalized environments.

Though our earlier research<sup>28</sup> indicates that smaller congregations, especially those that lack resources to employ multiple staff, may struggle to be effective mentoring environments, our study gives hopeful indications. As smaller churches need “all hands on deck” to be effective in both in-reach and outreach ministries, active small churches provide multiple opportunities for aspiring clergy to get their feet wet in ministry. Additionally, our case studies and the CAME survey demonstrate that intentionality is critical in establishing mentoring environments. None of the three churches we studied

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<sup>27</sup> Resource Center, 312–13.

<sup>28</sup> Resource Center, 312–13.

developed mentoring cultures by accident. In every case, there was a history of former clergy, laypersons, and/or denominational leaders who purposely created an environment conducive to cultivating new ministers. Small churches can certainly emulate this intentionality, and future research will likely uncover examples of small churches that serve as exemplary mentoring environments.

Our research demonstrates that congregational environments can facilitate and encourage individual mentoring. Religious communities that are interested in cultivating rich webs of mentoring, especially with the design of nurturing future pastoral leaders, can take heart that mentoring environments aren't limited to the largest churches. Our evidence indicates that churches can build on their unique strengths and distinctive denominational identities to foster cultures of dynamic involvement where laity are "called out" into the work of ministry. Successful mentoring churches surround aspiring ministers with formal and informal structures of support (and challenge) via lay and clergy mentors. Through a robust process of individual and corporate discernment, then, some find themselves not only called into ministry but also "called up" into formal roles of religious leadership.

## Appendix A

### Congregational “Mentee” Interviews Congregations as Mentoring Environments (CAME) Project

1. Describe your journey to ministry, beginning with your earliest memories of church, your conversion experience, and your call to ministry. Please be as specific as possible.

- Probe for role of family (parents, grandparents, siblings, etc.)
- Probe for the influence of key mentors, other than family (ministers, friends, teachers, etc.)
- Probe for small group experiences, retreats, special programs of worship, etc.

2. You mentioned a few persons who were important in your journey to ministry. Now, list the 3 persons who you believe were the MOST IMPORTANT mentors (first names only, please):

- a) \_\_\_\_\_  
 b) \_\_\_\_\_  
 c) \_\_\_\_\_

3. When you think of \_\_\_\_\_ (say each name, and repeat each series of questions separately), what key characteristics, important experiences, and/or indispensable advice come to mind? Please be as specific as possible.

4. Considering your experience with key mentors in your life, how would you define the term, “mentor?”

5. In her recent book, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, Sharon Parks talks about churches as mentoring environments.

First, what do you think it might mean for a church to be a mentor?

Second, how did \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in first with the name of the case study church and second, with “other churches or religious groups”) “mentor” you in your call to ministry? In other words, how was the congregation (or, how were they) a “mentoring environment” for you?

- Probe for people, groups, experiences, and/or events that nurtured a call to ministry.

6. Is there anything else about your call to ministry and the church’s role in nurturing that call that you would like to add?

## Appendix B

### Congregational “Mentor” Interviews Congregations as Mentoring Environments (CAME) Project

1. How would you describe [Church name] to a stranger?
2. [Church name] was recommended to our research team because it encourages and supports those who are called to ministry. We think that churches like this provide important “mentoring environments” for persons called to ministry.
  - a. How would you define the word, “mentor?” How do you think a church “mentors” those who are called to ministry?
  - b. In what specific ways is [Church name] a “mentoring environment”?
  - c. Name the persons you know who were “called to ministry” while a member of this church. Choose a few and talk about them, especially things you remember about how you interacted with them and how they were involved with [Church name].
  - d. How could [Church name] do a better job mentoring those who are called to ministry?

3. Some of those who received mentoring at [Church name] mentioned you as an important mentor in their call to ministry.

- a. Does that surprise you? If yes, why? If no, why not?
- b. Who are the mentors that made a difference in your life? How specifically did they influence you?
- c. If you have not already done so in the previous question, please talk about the minister or ministers who have been most influential in your own life.

4. In your opinion, is the call to ministry different from other careers or vocational callings? If yes, why? If no, why not?

- a. How does this difference or lack of difference affect the way a church “mentors” persons called to ministry?

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