COMING OFF THE TRACKS: IDENTIFYING (AND AVOIDING) DERAILING BEHAVIORS

JOHN L. BENNETT AND JULIE M. GAWLE

Abstract[1]

This qualitative study sought to understand the antecedents to derailment within a new workplace context. Currently, no known scholarly literature has analyzed derailment within a religious work environment. Thirty-seven interviews with United Methodist Church (USA) (UMC) congregational leaders (pastors), staff, and congregational members were analyzed using an inductive phenomenological thematic content analysis to identify the antecedents that might indicate derailment. Data indicate that pastors who derail exhibit leadership deficiencies, are unable to disconnect, and fail to set professional boundaries. This study closes a gap in derailment research by identifying derailing antecedents specific to congregational leaders.

Introduction

After nearly twenty years as lead pastor of Seattle's Mars Hill Church, Mark Driscoll resigned. In a statement, the church's board of overseers concluded that Driscoll had "been guilty of arrogance, responding to conflict with

John L. Bennett is Professor in Business & Behavioral Science and the Wayland H. Cato, Jr. Chair of Leadership at McColl School of Business, Queens University of Charlotte, North Carolina.

Julie M. Gawle is a Graduate Assistant at McColl School of Business, Queens University of Charlotte, North Carolina.

a quick temper and harsh speech, and leading the staff and elders in a domineering manner. Most of the charges involved attitudes and behaviors reflected by a domineering style of leadership."[2]

Driscoll derailed. His arrogance, bullying, and inability to build and maintain a team led to his downfall. Derailment is a process by which leaders finds themselves "being involuntarily plateaued, demoted, or fired below the level of anticipated achievement or reaching that level only to fail unexpectedly."[3]

Current derailment research is focused on for-profit arenas and has not specifically included religious institutions. Understanding derailment can help all leaders, including congregational leaders (i.e., pastors), understand the areas in which they might experience a higher risk of unexpected failure. Understanding and preventing derailment is important for all organizations, including churches. A Towers Watson study showed that quality leadership is a critical component of congregational vitality, including increased membership and financial giving.[4] Jens Rowold showed that effective pastoral leadership could impact congregational satisfaction and congregational commitment (e.g., volunteering for the church).[5] For these reasons, this study seeks to close a gap in derailment research by identifying derailing indicators specific to pastors.

---

[2] Kate Shellnut and Morgan Lee, "Mark Driscoll Resigns from Mars Hill," *Christianity Today*, October 14, 2014, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/october-web-only/mark-driscoll-resigns-from-mars-hill.html.
[3] Michael M. Lombardo, Marian N. Ruderman, and Cynthia D. McCauley, "Explanations of Success and Derailment in Upper-Level Management," *Journal of Business and Psychology* 2(3) (1988): 199, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01014038.
[4] David de Wetter, Ilene Gochman, Rich Luss, and Rick Sherwood, "UMC Call to Action: Vital Congregations Research Project" (Findings Report for Steering Team, Towers Watson Consulting, June 28, 2010).
[5] Jens Rowold, "Effects of Transactional and Transformational Leadership of Pastors," *Pastoral Psychology* 56(4) (2008): 403–411, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-008-0121-6.

Literature Review

Derailment is a process, not a one-time event.[6] "Standards of excellence change as managers who were first rewarded for standout individual contributions are later expected to orchestrate a network, team build, and see that things are done rather than do many tasks alone."[7] Three patterns indicate the derailment process. First, early in a leader's career, he or she is selected for advancement because his or her skills and strengths fit the role's requirements. Over time, however, those skills no longer fit and the leader fails to adapt to new requirements.[8] Another example is when a competency that was once a strength becomes a weakness.[9] "Weaknesses and flaws that did not matter previously or that were forgiven in light of strengths or results may become more obvious in a new situation."[10] Third, previous successes can translate to arrogance by the leader, who believes that he or she can do no wrong, thus alienating team members and peers until no one wants to partner with the leader.[11] These studies show that derailment is not a point-in-time event but instead occurs over a longer period. These negative behaviors eventually chip away at any positive perceptions held by bosses, peers, and direct reports until the

---

[6] Tim Irwin, *Derailed: Five Lessons Learned from Catastrophic Failures of Leadership* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2009);

Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger, *Preventing Derailment: What to Do Before It's Too Late* (Greensboro, N.C.: Center of Creative Leadership, 1989); Yi Zhang, Jean Brittain Leslie, and Kelly M. Hannum, "Trouble Ahead: Derailment Is Alive and Well," *Thunderbird International Business Review* 55(1) (2013), https://doi.org/10.1002/tie.21525.

[7] Lombardo and Eichinger, 6.

[8] Liz DiMarco Weinmann, "10 Steps to Lead College Presidents Away from the Edge," *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* April 10, 2018, https://www.chronicle.com/article/10-Steps-to-Lead-College/243081?cid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en&elqTrackId=d873485bacbe474081f3dacc9cf2941c&elq=7c7fc4b0310e4befb08336d815af0280&elqaid=18565&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=8340.

[9] Lombardo and Eichinger, 10.

[10] Zhang, Leslie, and Hannum, 96.

[11] Lombardo and Eichinger, 10; Zhang, Leslie, and Hannum, 96.

individual is viewed as ineffective.

Derailment is not about lack of opportunities for advancement; career growth opportunities are reduced as executives climb the corporate ladder because fewer roles are available.[12] Also, it is not related to those leaders who have made a personal decision to stay at a stable level within an organization.[13] Instead, derailment is a pattern of career-altering negative behavior.

V. Jon Bentz was among the first to report on derailing behaviors.[14] Through more than thirty years of assessments and conducting interviews with executives at Sears, Roebuck and Company, Bentz and his colleagues found that the Sears' leader "is intellectually superior, appears to be a goal-oriented person, enjoys unusually fine personal adjustment, and possesses the confidence and ambition" to be successful in the role of executive.[15] Yet these leaders would fail because they "lacked business skills, were unable to deal with complexity, were reactive and tactical, were unable to delegate, were unable to build a team, were unable to maintain relationships with a network of contacts, let emotions cloud their judgment, were slow to learn."[16]

In the 1980s, the Center for Creative Leadership continued Bentz's work by conducting a series of interviews with more than forty male executives to understand the success cases and the failures of top

---

[12] Zhang, Leslie, and Hannum, 95.

[13] Center for Creative Leadership, "Bad News/Good News," Greensboro, N.C., 2001. Retrieved from http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/publications/badnewsgoodnews.pdf.

[14] Joyce Hogan, Robert Hogan, and Robert B. Kaiser, "Management Derailment: Personality Assessment and Mitigation," Draft chapter to be included in volume 3 of *APA Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, ed. Sheldon Zedeck (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2009), 1–28.

[15] V. Jon Bentz, "The Sears Experience in the Investigation, Description, and Prediction of Executive Behavior," eds. Frederic R. Wickert and Dalton E. McFarland (New York, N.Y.: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), 153.

[16] Hogan, Hogan, and Kaiser, 4.

leaders.[17] McCall and Lombardo found that derailed executives had, on average, at least two of the following behavioral flaws:

- The executive had specific performance problems with the business.
- The executive was insensitive to others; he or she had an abrasive, intimidating, bullying style.
- The executive was cold, aloof, and/or arrogant.
- The executive betrayed trust.
- The executive was an over-manager who failed to delegate or build a team.
- The executive was overly ambitious, thinking of the next job and playing politics.
- The executive failed to staff effectively.
- The executive was unable to think strategically.
- The executive was unable to adapt to a boss with a different style.
- The executive was overly dependent on an advocate or a mentor.[18]

In their 1983 study, McCall and Lombardo found that executives who exhibited signs of burnout had a higher likelihood of derailing; however, this finding was not replicated in the later study.[19]

Preventing derailment is important for any organization, including churches. Quality leadership is the key to a financially thriving and effective organization.[20] Conversely, poor leadership can negatively impact organizational effectiveness by impacting team and

---

[17] M. W. McCall and Michael M. Lombardo, "Off the Track: Why and How Successful Executives Get Derailed," *Bottomline* 7(9) (1990): 24–30.

[18] McCall and Lombardo, 26.

[19] Lombardo, Ruderman, and McCauley, 202–214.

[20] Tope Adeyemi-Bello, "The Impact of Leadership Style on Organizational Growth," *Work Study* 50(4/5) (2001): 150–153; Robert Hogan and Robert B. Kaiser, "What We Know About Leadership," *Review of General Psychology* 9(2) (2005): 169–180, https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.9.2.169.

employee effectiveness.[21] Ineffective leaders "perpetrate terrible misery on those subject to their domain."[22] The leaders who enact this "terrible misery" are not only in the top ranks of a company. Housman and Minor expand upon this concept through their description of toxic employees at all levels of an organization who, through their damaging behavior, can negatively impact a company's performance.[23] Ineffective leadership can also result in a financial impact to a company. Lombardo, Ruderman, and McCauley reported in 1988 that it would cost $500,000 to replace a senior leader.[24] Adjusted for inflation, the amount would be $1,078,452 in 2018.[25]

Now that a deeper description of the derailment process and behaviors has been provided, the focus will shift to the current study.

Method

The qualitative research methodology utilized for this study was an inductive phenomenological thematic content analysis using archive data gathered via interviews with United Methodist Church (USA) (UMC) pastors, staff members, and congregational lay leaders. This research procedure was selected because it enables an analysis of the subjects' lived experiences expressed in their own words to uncover themes that help explain the phenomenon of derailment within a religious work environment.[26] Pilot testing of the content analysis coding

[21] Robert Hogan, Gordon Curphy, and Joyce Hogan, "What We Know About Leadership: Effectiveness and Personality," *American Psychologist* 49(6) (1994): 493–504.

[22] Hogan and Kaiser, 169.

[23] Michael Housman and Dylan Minor, "Toxic Employees" (Working Paper 16-057, Harvard Business School, 2015). Retrieved from http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/16-057_d45c0b4f-fa19-49de-8f1b-4b12fe054fea.pdf.

[24] Lombardo, Ruderman, and McCauley, 201.

[25] "CPI Calculator," Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed on April 20, 2018, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

[26] John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2014); Max Van Manen,

method was conducted with a subset of the data and was shown to be a valid approach to analyzing the interviews. In the next sections, participant selection and data-coding procedures will be discussed.

Participants

The derailment study is part of a larger research project: the Ordination Preparation Program Evaluation and Congregational Leader Development (OPPE/CLD) study. The OPPE/CLD study seeks to identify characteristics of successful pastors (positive behaviors) and characteristics of those who derailed (negative behaviors). A research study by Towers Watson identified four primary drivers and eight key indicators of vitality, which included average attendance as percentage of membership, the number of youth programs and youth attendance, and annual member giving.[27] Data from UMC congregations in the North Carolina and Western North Carolina Conferences were gathered and compared to these drivers. UMC identified a population of congregations ranking in the top twenty-five percent for achieving the greatest number of drivers and indicators. A total of fifteen congregations agreed to participate in the OPPE/CLD study, seven from the North Carolina Conference (NCC) and eight from the Western North Carolina Conference (WNCC). A total of sixty-eight semi-structured, thirty-minute to one-hour interviews were conducted with pastors, staff, and members of the fifteen congregations between August 2015 and January 2017.

To be included in this derailment study, at least one personal derailment story needed to be presented in the interview, and stories about public derailment were omitted. Ultimately, fourteen congregations were included in the study: six churches from the NCC and eight

churches from the WNCC. In the thirty-seven interviews included in this study, a total of fifty-four unique, usable derailment stories are included in the data set.

Participants for the derailment study included pastors, church staff, and congregational members. Age, marital status, and other demographic information were not collected on the subjects. The anonymity of the participants was protected. The interview protocol specifically outlined that while complete anonymity was not guaranteed, no names would be included in the final report; only roles (e.g., pastor, lay leader) would be identified in the final project report.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted following a protocol developed for the OPPE/CLD study. The semi-structured interviews had two parts. The first set of questions related to the current pastor and congregation and inquired into the behaviors exhibited by a pastor of a successful congregation. The second set of questions asked subjects to share a story of a pastor they knew who derailed. The interviewer defined derailment for the subject using the Lombardo, Ruderman, and McCauley definition.

Several methods of validity testing were used. First, this study used investigator triangulation through the use of two coders.[28] In addition, peer debriefings with the lead researcher of the broader OPPE/CLD study were conducted on multiple occasions.[29] Lastly, after the pilot study was completed, UMC District Superintendents were interviewed and asked about pastors who had derailed. Their experiences confirmed what had been discovered from the other interviews.

Two reliability approaches were used in this study. The data analysis team met weekly during the data-coding

---

[28] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2000), 201.
[29] Creswell, 201–202.

process to discuss their examination and findings.[30] These meetings helped ensure adherence to a literal interpretation of interview text. A goal of inter-coder agreement of at least eighty percent was targeted.[31]

Four rounds of coding were completed during the pilot study to identify the emerging themes in the interviews and to ensure that the themes exposed were accurate and valid. The coders looked for text that would uncover any antecedents or incidents that might have been an early indicator of derailment. The coding team also sought to understand what ultimately happened to these pastors (i.e., whether they were forced to leave the ministry). After the fourth round, an inter-coder agreement rate of eighty-one percent was achieved. When the two coders disagreed on a code, a discussion ensued to reach full agreement on the final classifications of each data point.

After the pilot concluded, an additional ten interviews were analyzed. The researchers sought to understand if new behaviors would be uncovered when additional data were included in the analysis. The same two coders analyzed these interviews to determine if new themes would emerge. After another four rounds of coding, the behavioral themes found during the pilot were confirmed and no new themes emerged. However, inter-coder agreement reached ninety-four percent as rater experience and understanding increased.

---

[30] Creswell, 203.

[31] Matthew B. Miles and A. M. Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1994), 64.

Results

This section will cover the themes found during the analysis of interviews, including the definition and illustrative quotes, and then move into a discussion of the findings.

Derailment Behavioral Indicators

The data analysis team identified text that would help answer the question, "Were any behavioral antecedents described that may have led to the pastor's derailment?" The interview participants did not always describe observable behaviors and instead recounted specific incidents to the interviewers. Six themes emerged from these stories. The themes and frequency of mention are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Behavioral Antecedents/Indicators of Derailment and Frequency of Mention

Theme	No. of Times Mentioned
Ineffective Leadership Skills	15
Disengagement	14
Inability to Disconnect	13
Incongruent Role Expectations	7
Exhibits Egotistic Behaviors	6

The most common theme uncovered was ineffective leadership skills, mentioned fifteen times. This theme is a broad categorization of deficiencies, but three sub-themes provide additional context. These sub-themes and illustrative quotes are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Sub-Themes of Poor Leadership Skills
with Illustrative Quotes

Sub-Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Inability to build political capital within the church's power structure/powerful coalition; shies away from conflicts	The pastor "didn't have the leadership skills to manage conflict…He or she reacted to a situation that he or she could have avoided." (Participant 14)
Poor administrative skills, such as an inability to hire and manage their staff and handle general church functions	"He continued to make decisions without allowing certain committees or maybe certain people in the leadership roles to have input, which in turn caused a lot of rifts and disagreements." (Participant 9)
Lack of awareness of their own skill deficiencies coupled with an inability to accept feedback	"They make it about themselves…they don't empower lay leadership, they don't understand that they're not a strong leader." (Participant 8)

The second-most-common theme that emerged from the analysis was disengagement. This theme can be summarized by a quote from Participant 26, a lay leader, who said, "He seemed a bit unhappy to be with us and didn't seem to do anything but the required show-up-on-Sunday-and-give-a-message." This theme appeared fourteen times in the interviews. The disengaged pastor might fail to attend important meetings or to prepare sufficiently for the Sunday sermon, or the congregation might perceive that the pastor displays a lack of commitment to the church.

The next indicator of derailment was a pastor's inability to disconnect from the church to focus on self-care and family. Inability-to-disconnect behaviors were mentioned thirteen times in the fifty-four stories. This theme surfaces when pastors lack work/life balance, fail to take time away from the church to spend time with family to recharge personally or spiritually, and do not build a support network to deal with the stressors of a pastor's life. Participant 12 tells the story of a pastor who was unable to disconnect: "I think she felt a lot of pressure because she was appointed by a very high functioning church … I think she just took all that, internalized it and thought, 'I've got to do everything I possibly can to make sure this happens.'" Participant 12 also said that this pastor was in some kind of committee meeting almost every night of the week and was constantly working. Based on the subjects' stories, pastors who are unable to disconnect from the church might experience a higher likelihood of derailment.

The next theme uncovered was incongruent role expectations. This theme has two parts. First, pastors exhibiting these behaviors have unrealistic expectations of themselves or believe they must be a perfect pastor. The second part of this theme speaks to the expectations the congregation has for the pastor. Congregation members might call pastors at home any time of day, look to the pastor for advice, or expect the pastor to visit a sick relative in the hospital every day. Participant 21, a church office manager, said, "I have seen that being a pastor is a tough job … I have seen pastors stressed out, just from all the demands. People can be so demanding." Whether these congregational expectations are spoken or unspoken, pastors might feel the unending pull of their congregation and try to live up to these expectations.

The final theme that appeared throughout the interviews was exhibiting egotistic behaviors. Six unique stories described these behaviors. Pastors who act in an egotistic manner were perceived to be arrogant or infallible, failed to respect pastor/congregant boundaries,

and took advantage of their position of power. Participant 30, director of Children's and Family Ministry, provided an example of this theme: "He was just a really strong personality, very much a leader, but little bit of 'my way or the highway' kind of leader. There were people that felt like they were being run over by him."

Now that the behavioral antecedents of derailment have been described, the derailment conditions will be discussed.

Derailment Conditions

The literature tells us that derailment is a process and typically is not defined by an explicit event. Yet, some interviewees described the pastor's derailment as being triggered by a specific incident. The interviews in this study did not always point to an incident; some indicated a decline in performance with no defining event. The research team calls these triggers "derailment conditions." Four conditions were found most frequently, and each will be discussed in the text that follows. Table 3 displays these four themes and the frequency of mention.

Table 3. Derailment Conditions and Frequency of Mention

Theme	No. of Times Mentioned
Sexual Indiscretion	16
Mental/Emotional Strain	11
Burnout	6
Misappropriation of Funds	4

The most common example of a derailment condition was sexual indiscretion. These stories described a specific event that sets the pastor's derailment in motion—typically involving the pastor's administrative and/or denominational manager and the removal or suspension of

the pastor. Even though these indiscretions might have been occurring for a long time, interviewees typically described the occasion when the congregation or denominational leader found out about the affair. These indiscretions, mentioned sixteen times, were between a pastor and a congregational member or lay leader, and involved the use of pornography and/or the molestation of a minor. An example was provided by Participant 1: "The pastor had a long-term affair with one of the parishioners. Even down to carrying on in the church office … my understanding, he even had a mattress in there."

The second-most-common condition was mental/emotional strain. The interview subjects told stories related to pastors' emotional or mental breakdowns or extreme negative reactions to work or home stress. The pastors' inability to compartmentalize their emotions due to outside pressures was described. Several interviewees used the terms *mental breakdown* or *mental health issues* in describing the event, although specific details were not provided and these terms were not intended as a clinical diagnosis. Participant 29, a lay leader, explains this theme by stating: "This pastor who derailed, he had some things in his background … and he ultimately just fell apart. He would make appointments and not be there. He would show up for a church service and decide he couldn't preach. And I think it was personal stuff that he hadn't been able to deal with and put away." Some interviewees described a breaking point the pastor exhibited (i.e., a defining incident that triggered his or her removal from the church), and others depicted long-term struggles with mental/emotional health.

Burnout, another condition cited by the interviewees, was mentioned six times. Burnout can occur when pastors work excessive hours and do not take time off, are overly dedicated to the church, or become overwhelmed by the responsibilities and expectations of the pastor role. Unlike getting caught for sexual indiscretion, burnout occurs slowly over time. Interviewees had the benefit of

hindsight, as the stories they told occurred in the past. Through retrospection, they were able to identify their pastor's derailment condition as burnout. Participant 3 described a pastor who had burned out by saying, "She just had such a disdain for the pastorate, for the people that she was around … it was just a negative energy that she carried and I think that led to her derailment. Burnout is the simplest way to put it."

The final condition mentioned was misappropriation of funds, mentioned four times. Misappropriation of funds refers to instances where a pastor either stole money from the church or "put some numbers together which didn't match" (Participant 14).

Results of Derailment

The researchers also sought to understand what ultimately happened to these pastors. Frequently, the interviewees were only aware that the pastor left the church, but they had no knowledge of what ultimately happened to the pastor. Table 4 outlines the major themes and the frequency of mention during the interviews.

Table 4. Results of Derailment Events and Frequency of Mention

Theme	No. of Times Mentioned
Involuntary Exit	18
Voluntary Exit	9
Continued to Serve	9
Unknown/Did Not Share	23

The most common result of a pastor's derailment was an involuntary exit either from an individual church or from the denomination. A variety of stories told by interviewees included pastors being involuntarily put on

leave or stripped of their credentials and removed as a pastor. Two stories were told of pastors who went to another denomination after being stripped of their denominational ordination, but they continued to serve as ministers. The second theme that emerged from the interview data showed pastors who left the church voluntarily. Stories were told of pastors who retired and those who chose to move to another type of ministry. The third-most-common event after pastors derail is that they continue to serve. This result was mentioned nine times. In a number of these events, the pastors did not reach their full potential. As examples, one was never fully ordained, and another, originally a lead pastor, was demoted to associate pastor. Other stories falling into this theme indicated that the derailed pastor was reassigned to another church and continued serving. Finally, twenty-three stories were told in which the interviewee did not know what happened to the pastor or did not share what happened.

Relationship Between Behaviors, Conditions, and Results

The fifty-four stories were analyzed to understand if a relationship exists between the behavioral antecedents, conditions, and results in order to uncover potential associations between these components. See Table 5 for a view of the relationships between the elements.

By comparing the indicators and the events, this research shows that evidence supports that antecedent behaviors are associated with derailment conditions. Pastors who exhibited egotistic behaviors and who were unable to disconnect were more likely to derail due to a sexual indiscretion. These same pastors were more likely to be involuntarily terminated or stripped of their credentials. A connection also was found between ineffective leadership skills and mental/emotional strain. To summarize, this comparison led the research team to conclude that the behaviors described in the interviews can lead to derailment.

Table 5. Comparison of Derailment Elements

Derailment Elements	Indiscretion	Strain	Burnout	Funds
Inability to disconnect	6*	2	4*	
Ineffective leadership skills	1	4*	2	1
Disengagement		3	2	
Exhibits egotist behaviors	4*	1	1	1
Incongruent role expectations	1	2	2	1
Involuntary exit	8*	2		1
Voluntary exit	1	2	2	
Continued to serve	2	2		
Unknown/Subject did not share	5*	3	2	1

Note: Only stories with two elements (condition, indicator) were included for analysis. *N*=32 stories.
*Indicates values with four or more mentions.

Next, we present what the data might mean to pastors and to church and denominational leaders. The subsequent section will also discuss how this study contributes to and expands the current body of derailment research.

Study Findings

The main findings of this study are two-fold. First, behaviors and conditions that might indicate possible derailment were uncovered. These results are important because they provide pastors, lay leaders, and denominational leaders data on behaviors that might indicate an impending derailment. Second, after comparing antecedents, conditions, and the result of derailment, this

research shows a connection between a pastor's behavior and what could occur if a derailment intervention does not take place. Our research is able to provide pastors, congregational members, and denominational leaders with an early warning that derailment is possible. Each of these key findings will be discussed in this section.

Behavioral Indicators

The data indicate that pastors who exhibit certain behaviors have the potential to derail. First, pastors who exhibit poor leadership skills are more likely to derail. Second, pastors who are unable to disconnect and recharge personally and spiritually, harbor unrealistic expectations of themselves, and do not set personal or professional boundaries are more likely to derail. These themes will be reviewed in the text that follows and include a description of the behavioral indicators that might appear. Potential strategies to mitigate risks of derailment are offered throughout.

This research found that pastors who exhibit ineffective leadership skills are at risk for derailment. There is a gap in leadership and management education in seminaries, despite that leadership and the ability to manage conflicts are two of the more challenging aspects of a pastor's role. "When pastors enter the ministry … they are often shocked by how much leadership and management are involved in their work. They are also surprised by how little their ministry training prepared them for these often unpleasant and misunderstood aspects of their calling."[32] Thomas Edward Frank posited that pastors are not educated on effective leadership traits through formal seminary education.[33] Participant 15, a pastor, stated, "I've been to seminary. That does not

---

[32] Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving,* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 199–200.

[33] Thomas Edward Frank, "Leadership and Administration: An Emerging Field of Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 10(1) (2006): 113.

prepare you for what you are going to find when you get in a church. When you just sit in the pew, you don't see what you see when you start getting into leadership. And it ain't always pretty." A study by LifeWay Research found that fewer than half the 734 pastors (forty-eight percent) surveyed felt that seminary had prepared them for the people side of ministry.[34] "The result of this [lack of leadership education] is a faithful ordained leadership that is prepared well in some ways but does not have a background in leadership."[35]

Congregations should also realize that they need strong pastoral leaders. A study through the Duke Divinity School asked lay leaders on search committees what they were looking for in a new pastor, and found that the first two criteria were (a) competence and authenticity, and (b) someone who is a good preacher and leader of worship. In fact, "consensus builder, lay ministry coach and responsive leader" was eighth on a list of nine items.[36] It seems to be the perfect storm: seminaries do not provide leadership education and congregations do not look for pastors with strong leadership qualities, yet pastors are placed in churches requiring strong leadership competencies. The storm culminates with the pastor feeling stressed and insufficiently prepared.[37] Participant 2 summarized the challenge pastors might face by saying, "They come in, and they're ready to preach. Okay, that's good. They're ready to listen … and be friendly as they possibly can, but a lot of times they're not ready for the dynamics of what

---

[34] "Pastor Protection Research Study" (Research Report, LifeWay Research, 2016), 101, https://lifewayresearch.com/2016/01/12/former-pastors-report-lack-of-support-led-to-abandoning-pastorate/.

[35] James B. Lemler, "Identity and Effectiveness in the Twenty-First Century," *Anglican Theological Review* 92(1) (2010): 100.

[36] Adair T. Lummis, "What Do Lay People Want in Pastors? Answers from Lay Search Committee Chairs and Regional Judicatory Leaders" (Pulpit and Pew Research Reports, Durham, N.C.: Duke Divinity School, 2003): 20, https://www.faithandleadership.com/programs/spe/resources/ppr/pastorsearch.pdf.

[37] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 251.

people can do, of what people can say, and how people can act and … the interchange of people and relationships."

Pastors who are unable to disconnect from their role as a pastor are more likely to derail. Pastors are required to fill multiple roles including shepherd, teacher, spiritual advisor, manager, leader, coach, mentor, therapist, and fundraiser.[38] These demands can be self-imposed and externally imposed by the congregation.[39] If pastors are perceived to fail at any of the multitude of responsibilities, they are chided, judged by outspoken congregational members, or might place blame on themselves.[40] Participant 21, a staff member, said, "Pretty much they are on call twenty-four/seven. They get called at home, in the middle of the night, on vacation. They never seem to get a break."

The themes of inability to disconnect, disengagement, and incongruent role expectations are interrelated, and refer to pastors' inability to maintain personal and professional boundaries. The behaviors that might show up include pastors who are never far from the phone and spend more time at church than at home. These themes are interconnected: pastors who do not set professional

---

[38] Frank, 113; Lummis, 2; H. Newton Maloney, "Ministerial Effectiveness: A Review of Recent Research," *Pastoral Psychology* 33(2) (1984): 96–104, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01086370; Andrew Miles and Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, "Overcoming the Challenges of Pastoral Work? Peer Support Groups and Psychological Distress Among United Methodist Church Clergy," *Sociology of Religion* 74(2) (2013): 199–226, https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srs055; Phillip D. Parker and Andrew J. Martin, "Clergy Motivation and Occupational Well-Being: Exploring a Quadripolar Model and Its Role in Predicting Burnout and Engagement," *Journal of Religion and Health* 50(3) (2011): 656–674, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-009-9303-5; David Pooler, "Pastors and Congregations at Risk: Insights from Role Identity Theory," *Pastoral Psychology* 60(5) (2011): 710, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-011-0356-5; K. Thomas Resane, "Leadership for the Church: The Shepherd Model," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 70(1) (2014): 1, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2045.
[39] Pooler, 710–711; C. A. Wickman, "Ex-Pastors: Why Did They Leave?" *Christianity Today* 27(002) (January 21, 1983): 41.
[40] Pooler, 708.

boundaries can burn out, and, as a result, might disengage and distance themselves emotionally from their congregation. Pastors who are unwilling to share the human side of themselves with their congregation (theme of incongruent role expectations) might end up focusing their energy in masking the imperfect side of themselves, and overcompensate these perceived imperfections by wholly committing themselves to a level of congregational support that is unsustainable and unhealthy for the pastor. Participant 5, a lay committee chair, stated, "The idea of being perfect and living up to expectations of all of the people in your church and your community is . . . that's a lot of pressure." These results are supported by research conducted by David Pooler who found that the strain of the excessive demands, burnout, and disengagement might lead to pastors' misconduct, like sexual indiscretions.[41]

Mental/emotional strain also can be an indicator of derailment. Carl Wells found a strong association between work-related stress and emotional health.[42] Andrew Miles and Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell studied UMC pastors and also found that the occupational stress pastors encounter can lead to mental health challenges.[43] These results indicate that pastors who demonstrate poor leadership skills and fail to disconnect from the church are more likely to derail.

Implications for Pastors, Churches, and Denominational Leaders

These results are applicable to pastors, church members and lay leaders, and denominational leaders, and they shed light on some indicators of pastor derailment. If these behaviors recur, derailment is possible. First, pastors should increase their self-awareness to be mindful of their

---

[41] Pooler, 706–711.

[42] Carl Wells, "The Effects of Workday-Related and Boundary-Related Stress on the Emotional and Physical Health Status of Ordained Clergy," *Pastoral Psychology* 62(1) (2013): 101–114, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-012-0455-y.

[43] Miles and Proeschold-Bell, 200.

own tendencies and deficiencies. Pastors who were interviewed for this study mentioned personality assessments they had completed through continuing educational opportunities; they were given opportunities to learn about themselves. Pastors need to understand who they are—their personality attributes, their personal resiliency levels, and their blind spots. This knowledge can help them better understand where they are likely to stumble, so they can develop their personal coping style to compensate. Resilient behaviors can be learned. In the book *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving*, Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie conducted a study to determine the qualities needed by pastors in order to survive and thrive in ministry. Their qualitative research found that pastors needed skills in self-care, emotional intelligence, marriage and family, and leadership and management. Pastors' peers, the denomination, seminaries, and other programs should continue to emphasize that pastors do not need to be perfect and are allowed to be human. They also need to provide personal development skills and tactics to encourage self-awareness. In addition, pastors should attempt to find a balance between critical situations when they are needed, and business-as-usual events when they can opt out and take personal time. For example, pastors do not need to attend every committee meeting held at their churches but might want to make themselves available when a church member dies. Pastors also should seek opportunities to develop their personal leadership skills and style. Multiple pastors interviewed for the OPPE/CLD study mentioned beneficial leadership strategies they learned by attending a pastor leadership program. Denominations should continue to organize, fund, and encourage participation in these types of programs.

Second, denominational leaders play an important role in averting pastor derailment. Understanding and recognizing these behaviors can enable denominational leaders to have conversations with pastors to reduce the

frequency of the behaviors and, therefore, the likelihood of derailment. Managers of pastors should consider adding leadership-development goals to a pastor's development plan each year, and a pastor's leadership skills should be considered during the appointment process. Younger, less-experienced pastors should be provided with leadership opportunities in an associate pastor role (preferably under an experienced lead pastor) rather than being placed as a lead pastor in a small church. Considering the frequency with which this theme appeared in the interviews, developing pastoral leadership skills should be a top priority for denominations.

In addition, church members and lay leaders should be educated on derailment and how to help pastors recognize when they are exhibiting these behaviors. Because these groups interact with their pastor more frequently than denominational leaders, they are in the best position to view destructive behaviors, provide pastors the space to disconnect and recharge, and intervene before the pastor derails.

Finally, to truly address the root cause of derailment, seminaries should be aware of these findings and adjust the course of study requirements for pastors. Seminaries should provide increased opportunities for pastors to learn and practice leadership skills. Student-pastors should hold their institutions accountable for providing them with the leadership-development opportunities required to be a successful congregational leader. These institutions must realize they are graduating ministers who are theologically excellent, but leadership deficient, and close the gap by providing more leadership education.

Limitations of the Study

This study exhibited some limitations. These limitations include the sample and selection of participants, the focus of the study, and a potential for social desirability bias.

This study included only a small sample of pastors and church members from North Carolina. Only fourteen

congregations were selected with a total of thirty-seven participants. Most of the churches included in the study are considered rural churches. This lack of diversity in participant demographics might have given rise to skewed results. Expanding the study to larger, urban churches might yield new and different themes. In addition, the data that were used to identify these congregations for the broader OPPE/CLD is more than four years old. If more recent data were gathered and analyzed against the indicators of vitality, it is possible that these congregations would not be selected to participate today. The focus of the broader OPPE/CLD study is that of successful pastors. Participants were selected because they are pastors of successful congregations or they work with such a pastor. Participants were not selected because they either had derailed or experienced a pastor derailing. The role of the congregation in pastor derailment was unexamined in this study; this research only examined behaviors specific to a pastor. The literature tells of powerful coalitions that appear in many churches.[44] However, the interviews did not analyze the internal dynamic of the congregation in any depth on a consistent basis. Another limitation is the tendency of the subjects to show restraint in their descriptions of derailed pastors. Some subjects started their stories with "This is anonymous, right . . ." or "You're not going to share this with anyone, are you?" The phenomena known as social desirability could be at

---

[44] D. Scott Barfoot, Bruce E. Winston, and Charles Wickman, "Forced Pastoral Exits: An Exploratory Study (Working Paper, Regent University School of Leadership Studies, 2005), 4–5, https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/working/forced_pastoral_exits.pdf; LifeWay Research, 101; Marcus Tanner, Jeffrey N. Wherry, and Anisa M. Zvonkovic, "Clergy Who Experience Trauma as a Result of Forced Termination," *Journal of Religion and Health* 52(4) (2013): 1281–1295, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-012-9571-3; Marcus Tanner and Anisa Zvonkovic, "Forced to Leave: Forced Termination Experiences of Assemblies of God Clergy and Its Connection to Stress and Well-Being Outcomes," *Pastoral Psychology* 60(5) (2011): 713–726, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-011-0339-6.

play here.[45] Because church congregations are often equated to a family, it is conceivable the subjects wanted to protect their church families, so the subjects were not perceived in a negative light. In addition, in many of the interviews the subjects seemed hesitant to speak ill of these derailed pastors, even though the interviewers stated numerous times not to share the name. It is possible that these parishioners are conditioned to see their pastors as infallible, and they do not tend to think critically about the pastor's behaviors.

Opportunities for Future Study

The results of this study indicate that further research into the derailment phenomena within a religious workplace is warranted. First, it is recommended that this study be replicated in urban churches, as well as in other regional contexts, to understand if the same types of behavioral antecedents are found. The second area that begs further study is the role the pastor selection/appointment systems might play in a pastor's derailment. The Towers Watson study found that pastors who had been in place at a church for a longer period of time were more likely to be effective.[46] Yet some pastors are reassigned after approximately four years, while others stay at one church for a decade or more. Considering the appointment processes within various denominations, it is challenging to know if these long-term pastors are kept in place because they are performing above expectations, or if they have achieved a career plateau. In addition, because pastors are not always in complete control of their career movement and progression (pastors believe they must go where they are placed), it is difficult to understand where pastors may stall in their upward career trajectory.

More research could be conducted to identify

---

[45] Anton J. Nederhof, "Methods of Coping with Social Desirability Bias: A Review," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 15(3) (1985): 263–280, https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420150303.
[46] De Wetter, Gochman, Luss, and Sherwood, 4.

behavioral strategies that successful pastors use to mitigate some of the indicators found in this derailment study. Further study also would be warranted to attempt to understand the internal dynamic of a church prior to a pastor's derailment. Finally, the gender of the derailed pastors was not gathered; it would be interesting to understand if male pastors derail in different ways and with different frequency than female pastors.

Despite this study's limitations, the results are noteworthy and move the research of derailment forward by expanding the analysis to a new work environment. The themes and behaviors uncovered indicate that derailment exists within the religious workplace and is different from the current understanding of corporate derailment. With the need for faithful and effective congregational leaders within the church today, pastors, denominational leaders, and lay leaders would benefit from a foundational understanding of derailment and behavioral indicators. For pastors and those who support them, having knowledge of derailment indicators would help them identify and mitigate the risks of pastor exits and derailment.