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Expanding the Horizontal Call: A Typology of Social Influence on the Call to Ministry

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This research examines the social actors and interactions that facilitate seminary students' sense of calling. Drawing from 36 in-depth interviews with first year Masters of Divinity students, we introduce six ideal typical social others who play a formative role in the early stages of a call to ministry: instigators, exemplars, interpreters, affirmers, challengers, and codiscerners. Together, these findings demonstrate that the call to ministry, while deeply personal, emerges through social interactions that facilitate and make plausible a person's sense of calling and that sustain it over time. Extending Richard Pitt's conceptualization of the "horizontal call," this paper argues that social others help evoke and solidify—not merely legitimate—a personal sense of call. This research also highlights differences in the social structuring of call by gender. Despite considerable gains in the ordination of women, we find that many still face obstacles to experiencing and embracing a call to ministry.

Keywords: *calling, ministry, seminary, pastoral ministry, career plans, vocation.*

Traditionally, the concept of call was used to describe the process by which some people are "set apart" by God for religious leadership. While many religious traditions emphasize the importance of a calling (Cahalan and Schuurman 2016), the concept is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. In most Christian communities, a call from God is considered an *essential* foundation for pursuing work in religious ministry, and many denominations require the verification and legitimation of God's call as part of the ordination process (Niebuhr 1956; Pitt 2012; Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998). Yet, God's call is often described as a deeply personal experience, one that can only be truly understood by the person who received it (James 1905; Naidu and Nzuza 2013). The (proto)typical call experience reinforces this perspective: Like Paul on the road to Damascus, God is said to speak directly to the one who was called, explicitly in words or through a vision, signs, and/or intense feelings. Both those who are called and scholars who study this religious phenomenon tend to describe the call as an interaction between God and the called, positioning it largely outside the realm of social and cultural influences (Pitt 2012).

In this paper, we seek to challenge this conceptualization by attending closely to the ways in which the call to ministry is, at all levels, socially structured. Richard Niebuhr underscores the social embeddedness of calling when he says, "But the call to ministry is not for our contemporaries first of all a mystic matter enacted in the solitariness of lonesome encounter; it is rather a call extended to social man [sic], the member of a community, through the mediation of community" (Niebuhr 1956, 85). Drawing from 36 in-depth interviews conducted with first-year Masters of

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Divinity (M.Div.) students at a Mainline Protestant seminary, we identify six ideal typical social actors who play formative roles in the development of students' sense of calling. *Instigators* are individuals who prompt, initiate, or otherwise encourage students to consider ministry as a vocation, paving the way for students to experience or feel a (personal) sense of calling. *Exemplars* model different occupational roles, career paths, or ways of doing ministry, making these paths seem possible and/or appealing. In the wake of an initial call experience, *interpreters* shape how students give meaning to their experiences and feelings, *affirmers* reinforce the reality of God's call, and *codiscerners* serve as conversation partners for students working to identify the specific content of their call and the steps needed to enact it. *Challengers,* on the other hand, are those who reject, dismiss, or deny students' sense of calling. Together, these findings demonstrate that the call to ministry, while deeply personal, emerges through social interactions that facilitate and make plausible a person's sense of calling and which sustain (or challenge) it over time (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Niebuhr 1956). Absent the social interactions that evoke, interpret, and affirm the call from God, a personal sense of calling cannot emerge or be meaningfully enacted.

This article makes several contributions. First, it contributes to a small but growing literature on the *antecedents*—or "birth"—of a called identity (Bloom, Colbert, and Nielsen 2021; Thompson and Bunderson 2019). While most existing research has focused on what happens *after* someone has a clear sense of calling—how the call is narrated (Bloom, Colbert, and Nielsen 2021; Steeves 2017; Williams 2013), how it is legitimated and performed (Pitt 2012), and the consequences of holding a call orientation toward one's work (Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Carroll 2006; Duffy and Dik 2013; Ferguson and Packard 2022)— we examine how a personal sense of calling is initially evoked and embraced. Second, in doing so, we build on and extend Richard Pitt's (2012) conceptualization of the "horizontal call" to include both the initial call experience and its early discernment. While Pitt constructs the horizontal call as the process of formal authentication and credentialing that occurs *in the wake of* the "vertical call" (from God) experience, we find that other people also play a critical role in instigating, interpreting, and discerning God's call, suggesting that the "vertical call" is itself socially structured. Finally, this paper contributes *specificity* to our understanding of the social embeddedness of called identities by identifying the ideal typical social actors and interactions that play a formative role in the early stages of a call to ministry. In doing so, we also highlight variations in the process of call formation by gender (Lawless 1991; Pitt 2012; Steeves 2017; Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998), identifying differences in the frequency and nature of formative social interactions reported by men and women. In the discussion, we consider the broader applications of our findings, especially in light of increasing attention to "calling" beyond religious occupations (Bloom, Colbert, and Nielsen 2021; Clydesdale 2016; Duffy and Dik 2013; Williams 2013).

Called identities: from consequences to antecedents

Most of the research on calling in the past two decades, especially among vocational psychologists and management scholars, has focused on the *consequences* of viewing one's work as a calling—as opposed to a job or career (Bellah et al. 1985). This line of research has identified a variety of positive, mostly work-related outcomes associated with a "call orientation" such as increased work commitment, identification, and job satisfaction (Duffy and Dik 2013; Praskova, Hood, and Creed 2014; Serow 1994; Thompson and Bunderson 2019) as well as higher levels of performance (Kim et al. 2018; Rawat and Nadavulakere 2015) and self-perceived ability (Riza and Heller 2015). On the other hand, this research also suggests that calling can be a "double edged sword" (Bunderson and Thompson 2009): those who view their work as a calling are more willing to make personal sacrifices, which may put them at higher risk of burnout and exploitation(Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Ferguson and Packard 2022; Proeschold-Bell and Byassee 2018; Schabram and Maitlis 2017).

Less common, however, is research on the *antecedents* and/or *maintenance* of a call orientation over time (see Thompson and Bunderson 2019 for a thorough review of existing literature). In other words, we know far less about how a "called identity" is initially evoked and embraced, or on how the called identity is legitimated, enacted, and/or sustained over time. This reflects the fact that most existing research on call focuses on individuals "who have already found and enacted their callings" (Bloom, Colbert, and Nielsen 2021:300). But how does a sense of call initially emerge? What leads someone to take the meaningful steps toward its formal enactment? As Thompson and Bunderson (2019:439) observe, "Absent a clear scholarly demonstration of the behaviors and decisions that tend to foster a sense of calling, those interested in developing a sense of calling among their workers are left with little guidance."

In this paper, we build on a small but growing literature that views calling as a *process* and that consequently attends closely to how a sense of calling emerges as well as how it develops and evolves over time (Bloom, Colbert, and Nielsen 2021; Riza and Heller 2015; Schabram and Maitlis 2017). We focus, in particular, on the early stages of called identity development—from the initial feelings of call to the first major step toward its enactment (i.e., enrolling in seminary). In doing so, we seek to foreground the *social embeddedness* of call formation by highlighting the people and interactions that help spark and solidify a personal sense of calling. While recent work in psychology has begun attending more explicitly to the social shaping of called identities, most work in this field has tended to construct called identity development as a largely intrapsychic process of self-reflection and narrative construction (see Bloom, Colbert, and Nielsen 2021 for a recent exception). This paper seeks to bring psychological research into conversation with existing sociological insights on the social shaping of called identities, including variations in call formation and enactment by gender.

Extending and specifying the horizontal call

To do so, we build on and extend existing research highlighting the *social* foundations of a call to ministry (Carroll 2006; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Niebuhr 1956; Pitt 2012; Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998). Richard Pitt's (2012) book, *Divine Callings: Understanding the Call to Ministry in Black Pentecostalism*, has been particularly influential. Based on interviews with 115 ministers and aspiring ministers in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), an historically Black Pentecostal denomination, Pitt identifies and theorizes the "horizontal call"— or the "credentialing process" that occurs in the wake of a "vertical call" from God (Pitt 2012:43). In doing so, Pitt highlights the important role played by religious leaders, denominational officials, and church members in the formal legitimation and enactment of a called (clerical) identity. To enter the ordination/licensing process, aspirants "have to convince a credentialing body that they have received a vertical call" (43). Afterward, aspiring ministers move through a series of steps and stages (including informal and formal training programs), each of which, Pitt argues, enhances and strengthens the individual's called identity.

In this paper, we apply Pitt's ideas to the case of current Christian seminary students enrolled in a program designed for people entering religious leadership. In doing so, we seek to *extend* the horizontal call in two primary ways. First, we extend the horizontal call to *include* the vertical call. In Pitt's analysis, the "horizontal call" begins only after the vertical call (from God) has occurred and the individual's personal sense of call is solidified. In dividing the "birth" of a called identity into these two stages (vertical and horizontal), Pitt also relegates the *social* shaping of call primarily to the latter stage. He argues,

> While human social networks may play a role in *confirming* one's belief that she is called, the major player in the calling narrative is always God. Regardless of whether the call comes through a series of experiences or one key encounter, God alone is credited with directing them to ministry (Pitt 2012:42).

For Pitt, congregations, denominations, and religious leaders play an important role in "*enhancing* the very strong beliefs ministers have that they have been called to religious labor" (15). Social factors, however, are backgrounded in Pitt's analysis of the vertical call, which instead foregrounds the subjective experiences (voices and visions) and feelings (urges, passions) that are common features of call narratives among his respondents.

Our findings, however, suggest that other people play important roles beyond the formal legitimation of a call after-the-fact. For one, we find that other people play an important role in *instigating* and *interpreting* the initial call experience, suggesting that the vertical call itself emerges through social processes (see also Niebuhr 1956:63–66). Second, we extend the horizontal call to include a period of discernment between the initial experience and the decision to enter the formal process of credentialing (education, licensing, and/or ordination). Our data suggest that the initial call is often ambiguous. Students reported looking to others for help *affirming* the reality of God's call and *discerning* its specific content (in other words, what specific occupational role or position they were being called to). In this period of discernment, others played important roles as exemplars and challengers, nudging students towards or away from particular vocational paths.

In extending the horizontal call, we also seek to *specify* the particular social actors and interactions that play an important role in these early stages of call formation. While we see evidence in existing research of the role played by others in evoking and solidifying a personal sense of calling (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Niebuhr 1956; Pitt 2012; Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998), the types of actors and interactions that matter most remain undertheorized. In this paper, we foreground these interactions, identifying a set of ideal typical actors who are salient in students' accounts and the specific people who tend to play these roles.

Finally, we attend to and highlight differences in the social shaping of call by gender. While the number of women clergy has grown modestly over the past several decades, particularly in Mainline Protestant denominations (Carroll 2006; Chaves 1999; Chaves et al. 2021),[1] women continue to face significant barriers to ordination and career advancement—what scholars have referred to as the "stained glass ceiling" (Adams 2007; Lehman 1980a; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Sullins 2000; Stewart-Thomas 2010). In some denominations and traditions, including the COGIC studied by Pitt, women are not allowed to be ordained or cannot serve in the same roles as men (Harvey 2018; Pitt 2012). Even in traditions that allow ordination, women are more likely to hold secondary rather than primary ministerial appointments (Chaves et al. 2021). Existing research has highlighted the challenges and barriers to advancement women face *as clergy* including gendered role expectations (Stewart-Thomas 2010), organizational and lay resistance (Adams 2007; Barnes 2006; Lehman 1980b; 1981), and gendered pathways after seminary (Chang 1997; Lehman 1980a).

There is less research, however, on when, how, and why women decide to pursue the clergy role and/or the challenges they face in doing so. The research that does exist suggests women to face a range of barriers to both feeling a call and pursuing it. Steeves (2017:48–49), for example, found that women clergy reported "the desire to serve God started early in their lives"; however, "with limited opportunities and few role models to follow, they typically pursued other careers." Others have found that women tend to enter seminary with different career goals than men (Finlay 1996), and are less likely to report a desire to work in a religious career (Ferguson 2015). Even in denominations open to women's ordination, women may feel pressure to opt out of certain career paths or occupational roles, especially those of primary leadership. Notably, Ferguson (2015) finds that feeling accepted at seminary impacts women's desire to pursue a religious career (while this does not significantly impact men), suggesting the importance of social support and affirmation in shaping call discernment and enactment. In this paper, we build on this work and

[1]The most recent wave of NCS data, for example, finds that women account for 30% of clergy in Mainline denominations.

attend closely to similarities and differences in the call stories of men and women, especially in regard to the type and frequency of social influences.

Data and methods

Data for this paper come from the Seminary-to-Early Ministry (SEM) study: a mixed-methods, longitudinal cohort study of seminary education. To better understand how and in what ways divinity school (in this paper, we use the terms seminary and divinity school interchangeably) forms students, the SEM study is following three cohorts of students at a Mainline Protestant seminary we call "Mainline Divinity School" (MDS) from matriculation into their early careers using regularly administered surveys and in-depth interviews that cover a range of topics including students' religious histories, intended career plans, theological views, religious and spiritual practices, academic experiences, and physical and mental health.MDS is one of 13 seminaries founded and supported by the United Methodist Church (UMC). While a plurality of MDS students identify as United Methodist (30–40 percent per cohort across all degree programs), the school also attracts students from a range of mostly Protestant denominations and traditions including Baptist, Anglican, Presbyterian, and nondenominational students.

We analyzed 36 in-depth interviews conducted with first year M.Div. students. The M.Div. program, which is focused on training students for careers in Christian ministry, enrolls approximately 120 students each year. All students entering MDS in 2019 were invited to participate in a series of three baseline surveys; 81 percent of M.Div. students completed all baseline surveys and were offered $70 gift cards as compensation. We then used stratified random sampling to select a representative subset of M.Div. students from the pool of survey respondents and invited them via email to participate in an in-depth interview about their experiences. Each prospective participant was contacted up to three times during recruitment. In total, we invited 48 students to participate in these interviews—75 percent consented to be interviewed. The interview sample is representative of the larger M.Div. class in terms of gender, race, and denominational affiliation. Of the 36 students we interviewed, 78 percent identified as White ($n = 28$), 56 percent as women ($n = 20$), and 47 percent ($n = 17$) as United Methodist.

Interviews were conducted in-person or by phone between November 2019 and January 2020. The semistructured interview guide covered several domains including students' decision to attend divinity school, career plans, theological views, and physical health practices. All interviews were audio-recoded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 2 hours, with an average of 90 minutes. Students received a $50 gift card as compensation for their time. Potentially identifying information was redacted from the transcripts and participants were assigned pseudonyms prior to analysis. For confidentiality reasons, we do not report the race, age, or denominational affiliation of students when sharing interview quotes. All study procedures were approved by [blinded] Institutional Review Board.

Transcripts were coded in NVivo 12 using applied thematic coding (Deterding and Waters 2018; Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2011). First, a structural codebook was deductively developed based on the themes, questions, and key probes covered in the interview guide. Three analysts met to establish intercoder reliability before applying structural codes to the remaining transcripts independently. Codebook definitions and codes were revised on an as-needed basis by mutual agreement. The analysis presented below included all segments of the interviews coded as relevant to the topic of "calling" during the structural coding process. In all cases, students affirmed that they felt called to pursue ministry. In most cases, students used the first question in our interview guide (see Supporting Information) as a prompt to tell their "call story." Students were then asked a series of questions about their sense of calling, including when, where, and how they knew they were called to ministry as well as whether and how their sense of calling has evolved. Responses to these questions and all related probes were coded under

"calling." This code was applied, on average, to 18 percent of each transcript (with a range of 8–34 percent).

The first author reviewed all text coded as relevant to this topic (a total of 227 pages of text) and inductively generated a thematic codebook using a constant comparison method (Charmaz 2014) to identify salient themes in students' responses. An early emergent theme from this analysis was the importance of social interactions in shaping students' sense of calling. In response, the first author began to code transcripts for all references to social influences in students' accounts, identifying both the type of person referenced (e.g., pastor, parent, friend, stranger) and the nature of their impact on students' sense of call (e.g., affirmed, challenged, evoked, interpreted). Throughout the coding process, the first author created thematic memos in which she identified additional emergent themes and questions for further analysis by moving between the data and existing research. For example, based on previous research (Pitt 2012; Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998), the author was aware of the important role played by "affirmers." The importance of affirmers in seminary students' accounts was then confirmed and refined through analysis. The remaining ideal typical categories outlined below were generated inductively. Initial categories were reviewed and, in some cases, combined—the category of "instigators," for example, combined individuals who "evoked a call experience," "spoke prophetically," and/or "encouraged consideration of ministry as a vocation." Finally, key demographic codes—including participant gender, race, and denomination—were added to the codebook and used to assess variations in social influences across students.

As ideal types, the categories outlined below provide an analytic lens to examine the varied social influences on students' sense of calling. Most of the students we spoke with mentioned more than one kind of social actor, and the same individual may be coded in multiple categories—for example, a youth pastor may act as an instigator, interpreter, and codiscerner at different points in a student's narrative. While there were some patterns in the temporal order and pairing of social influences (e.g., interpreters tended to follow instigators), there was also considerable variation in when and how different social actors shaped students' trajectories. In some cases, an exemplar simultaneously acted as an instigator—as in cases where meeting someone in a given occupational role both evoked a sense of call to that role and provided a model for how to fulfill it. In other cases, exemplars played a role during the discernment process, as students considered what specific role they were being called to fulfill within the broader field of religious ministry. Finally, it is important to recognize upfront that not all social others were equally influential—some people, such as pastors, tended to have greater impact given their status in the community and/or their relationship to the callee.

Findings

As first-year seminary students, all of the individuals in our sample had taken an important step toward enacting a call to ministry. But, how did they get to this stage? Below, we identify and describe six ideal typical social actors who played a salient role in shaping the initial development and solidification of respondents' sense of calling. In describing these actors, we also highlight differences in the frequency and nature of how these social actors appear in the accounts of women versus men in our sample. In the final section, we examine the kinds of people who tended to serve in these roles, finding pastors and family members were key actors.

Table 1,2 shows a breakdown of the social influences mentioned by students. The first column shows the total number and percentage of students (out of the 36 interviewees) who referenced each type of social influence at least once. Here, we can see that while nearly three-quarters of participants mentioned an instigator in their stories of call, only 14 percent mention an interaction with someone who challenged their sense of calling. In the next two columns, we see the types of social influences mentioned by participants' gender. Here, we can see that while some types of

Table 1: Participant demographics

Demographics ($n = 36$)	**n (%)**
Age	
21–29	27 (75)
30+	9 (25)
Gender	
Female	20 (56)
Male	16 (44)
Race[a]	
White	25 (78)
Black or African American	8 (22)
Other and/or Multiracial	3 (8)
Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin	
No	36 (100)
Denomination	
United Methodist	17 (47)
Other Protestant	12 (33)
Nondenominational	6 (17)
Other	1 (3)

[a] Students selected all that applied.

Table 2: Comparison of social influences mentioned by gender

Social Influence	All Students (n, %) $N = 36$	Women (n, %) $N = 20$	Men (n, %) $N = 16$
Instigator	26 (72%)	14 (70%)	12 (75%)
Exemplar	20 (56%)	8 (40%)	12 (75%)
Interpreter	6 (17%)	4 (20%)	2 (12.5%)
Affirmer	20 (56%)	9 (45%)	11 (69%)
Challenger	5 (14%)	4 (20%)	1 (6%)
Codiscerner	18 (50%)	10 (50%)	8 (50%)

social influence are mentioned in equal frequency by men and women (e.g., codiscerners), others are more commonly mentioned by women (e.g., challengers and interpreters) or by men (e.g., exemplars and affirmers). In the following sections, we provide examples of each type of social influence and highlight gender differences within categories.

Most students mentioned more than one social influence in their account, with an average of 2.6 social influences across all students. On average, men mentioned more social influences (2.9) than women (2.5). We also identified differences in the number of social influences mentioned by race, with White students mentioning fewer types of social influence (2.5) than Black students (3.1)— a point we return to in the discussion.

Types of Social Influences

Instigators

Instigators are individuals who prompt, initiate, or otherwise encourage others to consider ministry as a vocation. Seventeen of the students we spoke with (47 percent) mentioned that someone else—or several others—suggested religious ministry before they considered it seriously for themselves. For some, a personal sense of call was *primarily* rooted in the comments and suggestions of others. For others, external prompts to consider ministry were coupled with a strong internal sense and/or discrete experience of God's call.

Cole, for example, reported that his sense of calling "was revealed" to him through other people. He recalled, "I've had lots of people say, 'You have a good pastoral heart. You have a motivation to think about your faith and to express it. You're talented at it. You show drive' … The reason I believe I have a calling came out of other people." Jessica related a similar story. She reported that early on her sense of calling "was entirely external … People being like, 'You'd be great at this,' and 'You should do this." She highlighted two people as particularly impactful: the head pastor on her college campus and her "host father" while on a mission trip abroad. Both told her, on different occasions, that she should "go to seminary and be a pastor." While Jessica was originally reluctant—she hoped to become a teacher instead—she turned to ministry after realizing that teaching "was not [her] calling." For both Cole and Jessica, the initial impetus to consider religious ministry did not originate in a direct encounter with God, but through interaction with other people. Other people's observations and suggestions about their fit and aptitude for ministry *prompted* a personal sense of calling.

In other cases, people acted as instigators in a more diffuse way: they provided an opening or opportunity for those present to experience a call from God. While this type of instigating experience was not directed to the student specifically, these openings evoked and facilitated their initial call experience. Of the students we spoke with, 5 (14 percent) described an experience of this kind. Amy, for example, recalled,

> One year, on a mission trip, we all kind of formed a circle … my pastor invited anyone to step into the circle who potentially felt a calling to serve in ministry … before I knew what was happening, I was in the middle of the circle and it just kind of happened in the moment. And ever since … I've been trying to discern more about what that means.

Amy was already actively involved in her youth group and had experience preaching at her local church, but she only began to seriously consider ministry as a career after this discrete experience of God's call—an experience enabled by her pastor's invitation.

Hannah told a similar story and reported that she "felt an actual tug to go into ministry" while attending an annual religious conference for her denomination,

> I believe it was the Sunday service, where people were getting ordained. Our bishop asked if anyone was feeling the call to ministry to come forward and receive prayer. I feel like I had felt it somewhat previously going into that … but it was during the song of procession, of people going forward, that I really felt like I couldn't say no.

In both Amy and Hannah's accounts, a religious leader provided an opening for the student to experience and to claim a call to ministry both internally and publicly. Notably, in both cases, the instigating experience occurred in a distinctly religious context, removed from everyday life (e.g., mission trip, conference). This combination—being away from home, in a distinctly religious context, and being offered a formal opening—seemed to be especially powerful in eliciting call experiences.

Finally, in some cases, instigators spoke more prophetically. Darryl's story illustrates this clearly. He recalled,

> I went to a church camp the summer leading to my senior year of high school. I always knew I'm going to join the military, but never knew exactly what that was going to be, job-wise. During the church camp, I was able to experience the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues. I remember praying to God asking Him what exactly He wanted me to do … and then this random kid came up to me and told me, "Hey, I know I don't know you, but the Lord told me to tell you that He wants you to serve as chaplain."

In this account, God's call came directly through another person, who spoke prophetically on behalf of God. While Darryl was the only student in our sample who told a call story involving a prophetic instigator, research in other settings also points to the role of prophetic instigators in prompting a personal sense of calling (Naidu and Nzuza 2013; Pitt 2012).

The examples included in this section demonstrate how instigators play a role in both sudden and more gradual call stories (Pitt 2012), albeit in slightly different ways. In conventional (gradual) call stories, instigators suggest or encourage the student to consider ministry, observing how this career path would fit their talents, personality, or passions. These comments accumulate over time, leading the student to feel a personal sense of calling. In sudden or dramatic call experiences, instigators tend to offer an opening for individuals to experience a discrete call from God or speak more prophetically on behalf of God. In both cases, other people prompt or evoke (not merely validate) a personal sense of calling (Carroll 2006).

While men and women mentioned instigators at roughly equal rates, the *type* of instigator reported varied. We found that men were more likely to report instigators who directly and personally suggested they consider ministry as a vocation ($n = 10$, 63 percent) than their female counterparts ($n = 8$, 40 percent). On the other hand, of the five students who described feeling called in response to a more general or diffuse opening, four (80 percent) were women. This difference in direct versus diffuse instigating experiences may reflect continued resistance or hesitancy to women's ordination (Adams 2007; Barnes 2006; Lehman 1981). It may also help explain differences in women's pursuit of congregational leadership: without an explicit, personal invitation, women may be more likely to doubt the call or to persist when they face challengers (see below).

Exemplars

Exemplars are individuals who model a particular occupational role or career path, making it seem possible and/or appealing to the narrator and prompting students to consider that role for themselves. Twenty of the students we spoke with (56 percent) mentioned an exemplar in describing their call to ministry. Notably, however, we found important differences between men and women in how exemplars were discussed. First, we found that men were more likely to mention an exemplar ($n = 12$, 75 percent) than women ($n = 10$, 50 percent). And while there were a few exceptions, in nearly all cases, the gender of the exemplars mentioned by students matched their own.

We also found differences in the role exemplars played in students' pathway to ministry. For women, female exemplars were most often described as making ministry seem *possible*. In describing her sense of calling, Holly talked about a female pastor she "got really close" with while working in youth ministry during college,

> Growing up, they wouldn't have allowed women to preach… only like once in a while, and certainly not on the Bible. So, [Marcy] was the first person I met who was doing it. I mean, she was like, the reason the job became an option for me … I never considered it, because I had never seen anyone do it … I knew vaguely that it was possible, but I didn't really have any touch point for it.

Holly is clear about the important role Marcy played in her shaping her sense of calling: seeing a female pastor for the first time opened up the *possibility* of pastoral ministry for her. Without this exemplar, it would have been difficult for Holly to ever feel called to pastoral ministry.

Another student, Jennifer, also discussed female exemplars who played an important part in shaping her sense of what kinds of occupational roles were possible. Jennifer recalled,

> In high school, I felt called into full-time vocational ministry but the only examples of that that I saw were local church pastors. When I went to undergrad, I saw a woman as a pastor of the entire university … seeing her, I was like, "Whoa." I had never seen this before … And then when I got into classes with female professors of theology and biblical studies … so it's kind of like a gradual, seeing people in different roles and realizing, "Oh, these are actually positions that fit more with my interests."

For Jennifer, these female exemplars served as models for alternative pathways *outside* of congregational ministry. While Jennifer likely had male professors, her female professors are mentioned as prompting her to consider those roles as possibilities *for her*.

On the other hand, for the men in our sample, exemplars were more often described as making a given occupational role seem *appealing*. Cole, for example, told us,

> I had a pastor helping me to make this decision and shaping my imagination about ministry. He played a very large role in making the idea of pastoral work attractive to me … I mean there was a while in my life where I really thought I would never want to be a pastor. It wasn't really until college when I saw my pastor do ministry the way he did that I became attracted to the idea.

For Cole, pastoral ministry was always an option; however, it was not always an *attractive* option. He only began to seriously consider this role after seeing and interacting with this exemplar: a pastor who did ministry in a way he found appealing. Another student, Christopher, recalled the influential role of an undergraduate professor. He reported, "The guy was brilliant … I really looked up to him. I was like, 'Man, I want to be just like that.' … Ever since then, I firmly decided in my mind, I'm going to get my degree in undergraduate, go to a Masters of Divinity, get my PhD, and teach." This professor clearly served as an exemplar and role model for Christopher, prompting him to pursue a similar career path for himself.

These examples demonstrate that exemplars can play a role at different points or moments in the development of a student's sense of calling. Some exemplars are simultaneously instigators: Seeing someone (especially someone of the same gender) fulfill an occupational role in a particular way can spark a personal sense of call to the same position. Holly's story is an example of this. In other cases, like Jennifer's, exemplars expand the types of role students consider as they strive to discern their personal calling. In this case, Jennifer already felt a call to ministry (generally speaking) but seeing these women do ministry within the context of higher education (as college pastor or professor) prompted her to consider these roles for herself. In still other cases, like Cole's, exemplars model *how* to enact a given role, helping students identify the *kind* of pastor (or teacher or chaplain) they would like to be (or not be). In all cases, however, students' sense of call is developed in relation to examples provided by people around them. Our data also suggest that gender-matched others are the most influential role models. Given that the number of women in congregational ministry remains relatively low (Chaves et al. 2021; Chaves and Eagle 2015) and barriers to ordination and leadership remain high (Adams 2007; Lehman 1980b), women are less likely to interact with gender-matched exemplars and as a result, may be less likely to consider ministry as a potential vocational path.

Interpreters

Interpreters are individuals who help students make sense of, or give meaning to, their initial experiences and/or feelings of being called to ministry. These actors were most common in the accounts of students who reported sudden and dramatic call experiences such as a vision or dream. Six of the students (14 percent) who reported a mystical call experience also reported discussing the experience with a religious leader or mentor. In each case, it was this individual who first interpreted the experience *asa call* from God. Daniel, for example, recalled,

> I was sitting in church with our lead pastor. For the first time in my life I felt a very subtle, "That could be you. That could be something that I want you to do." … And I was like, "No, that's not me." So, I pushed it away

> for a while … I finally came to my youth pastor, I'm like, "Look, I've been having these feelings. What do I do with them?" He was the one that said, "Well, it sounds like God's calling you." So, a lot of prayer and a lot of discussing with him, started thinking that divinity school would be the next move.

Daniel reported that he initially rejected or dismissed the idea that he was called to ministry. It was only after discussing the experience with his youth pastor that Daniel came to believe that he was called and took steps toward enacting it. Through "a lot of discussing," Daniel's pastor helped him discern what steps to take next (here acting as both interpreter and codiscerner).

Lula told a similar story. Lula reported that her initial "vertical call" (from God) came during a church service more than a decade prior to the interview,

> Sitting in church one day, I got these sort of like … butterflies, really, in my stomach, and I forget what the pastor was preaching about … all of a sudden, I just felt … I almost saw myself behind the pulpit, and I'm like, "Well, what is this?" Because there is no way I'm going to be a preacher, right? But it just would not leave me alone … After that experience, I talked to my own pastor about this feeling, "What is this feeling I'm having?" And he said, "I think you've been called to ministry."

Lula's account, like Daniel's, points to the importance of interpreters in shaping students' sense of calling. Experiences alone—hearing God's voice or seeing a vision—do not necessarily speak for themselves. Rather, the experience requires interpretation. A felt sense of call then involves both an experience and the interpretation of that the experience as a call to ministry.

Affirmers

Affirmers are individuals who provide confirmation of the students' sense of calling, bolstering their confidence in the reality of God's call and their ability to fulfill it. More than half of the students we spoke with ($n = 20$, 56 percent) mentioned some form of external affirmation. For example, when asked how he knew that he was called by God, John told us,

> Partially, it was things that worked out … but it was also the people around me that really encouraged me and said, "Hey, you have felt this call. We also think that you're called" … Once I had the experience of preaching … people encouraging me and saying, I really learned a lot, or I really experienced God through your preaching … that also continued to reinforce what I already kind of thought … that God was calling me to this.

The solidification of John's sense of calling was rooted not only in events ("things that worked out")—which he interpreted as signs from God—but also in the support and encouragement of others in his community. Both factors bolstered John's internal sense of calling.

Affirmers were particularly important in helping students overcome negative emotions and/or feelings of doubt in the wake of a call experience (Naidu and Nzuza 2013; Pitt 2012). Noah, for example, recalled having "a lot of mixed feelings" after his call experience. He worried that he "wasn't capable or worthy and didn't have the ability to do ministry." However, Noah shared that his call was affirmed by "the pastoral leadership of the church and the adult volunteers … and a lot of other folks as well." Another student, Allison, vividly recalled an occasion, while attending a religious gathering, when she experienced doubt about her call,

> They had this day where they were going to put a verse on the board … play all this music, and if you felt called to ministry, you go up to the front and meet the Bishop. And I thought, "Wow, that's so cool. I really hope I feel something and I can go up there." And we get to the conference, and I'm sitting there and I don't feel anything at all. No warm feeling, no nothing. I'm just sitting there and I'm angry … but I said, "Screw this. I'm going to go up there anyway" … So, I walk up there, super quickly, kind of angry, and then I see my pastor's face on the right side, and she just looks at me so approvingly, and I just lose it. I start crying … Just that look, it was just all I needed, it was just that approval that I was looking for … I needed that reassurance.

Alison reported experiencing a strong and clear call to ministry on several different occasions prior to this event. However, not experiencing a "warm feeling" at this particular moment was difficult, and it generated feelings of anger and confusion. Her pastor's approving nods helped Alison overcome these feelings. In both cases, other people in the community, especially religious leaders, bolstered students' confidence in their calling, helping them to persist in the face of doubts about the reality of God's call and/or their ability to enact it.

Notably, we found differences by gender in the tendency to mention affirmers. While nearly three-quarters (70 percent) of the men in our sample mentioned at least one affirmer in the account of their call to ministry, less than half (45 percent) of the women we spoke with did so. Confirmation of the vertical call by others is considered a necessary (albeit not sufficient) aspect of the call to ministry in many religious communities. Those who perceive a call are often instructed to wait and to look for affirmation from others to confirm their internal feelings, and others have found that women are more likely to receive this advice (Pitt 2012; Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998). Given continuing hesitancy and in some cases explicit opposition to women clergy (Knoll and Bolin 2018; Lehman 1980b), women may be less likely to have their call affirmed by others. As a result, some may question and even abandon the pursuit of ministry (Steeves 2017).

Challengers

Challengers are individuals who reject, dismiss, or deny a person's sense of calling. While only five students (14 percent) mentioned encounters with challengers, these experiences were impactful. Notably, we found that more women ($n = 4$, 20 percent) reported challengers than men ($n = 1$, 6 percent). The kinds of challenges faced by male and female students also differed.

All four of the women who mentioned challengers reported that their *ability* to serve as pastors and/or religious leaders was questioned because of their gender. Allison's story illustrates this well. Allison began by describing her initial call experience,

> I went to a conference my junior year of high school … John Piper [a popular conservative theologian who opposes women being pastors] was actually speaking … afterwards he said, "Raise your hand if you feel called in to ministry." And I just felt this overwhelming, warm feeling … and I raised my hand, and of course, I open eyes because I want to see who else's hands were raised … and it was all men. So then, in my head, I'm thinking, "Oh, so maybe I'm called to help women." Because John Piper doesn't believe women can be pastors … So, I went home, and I started looking up women's shelters.

Allison's call experience, which comes after a religious leader provides an opening (instigator), is dampened by her belief that women cannot be called to pastoral ministry. As a result, Allison dismissed an internal sense of call to pastoral ministry to pursue other options.

Through a series of affirming experiences, however, Allison eventually came to believe she was called to pastoral ministry and, as a result, made plans to attend seminary and pursue ordination. Yet, she continued to face challengers. While filling out applications for seminary at a local coffee shop, Allison recalled being approached by two Catholic evangelists (both men). When she informed them that she was "actually about to apply for seminary,"

> They looked at me like I had four heads … And then it got quiet and kind of awkward … They were really mean to me and said how women aren't called to be ministers … I was about to cry, and I didn't want to cry in front of them … I just walked off. It hurt a lot.

That same day, Allison "got an email that said [she] was an accepted candidate into the ordination process." She interpreted this email as affirmation (from God) of her calling; "I get broken up and then I get put back together." Allison's experiences illustrate that individuals who face challengers may require external affirmation or signs to sustain a personal sense of call.

Only one male student described an encounter with challengers. Josh's vertical call came while he was being baptized at a Christian summer camp. In that moment, Josh reported hearing

the voice of God instructing him to become a pastor. Afterward, he discussed the experience with his pastor, who affirmed his sense of calling. Josh continued,

> … went back home, told my parents. They were pissed. They were like "No, you're not going into ministry. You're not going to make any money." … And they're like "You're too smart for that" … "You'd be whatever you want … a doctor, businessperson, all this stuff. Why settle for being a pastor? Like, you can use those things to glorify God." I was like "OK, you're right." So basically, kind of gave up on that. I was like "I'll just get super involved in the church, but pursue being a doctor."

Unlike Allison, the challenge Josh faced was not about his *ability* to become a pastor but was related, instead, to the status and financial earnings that being a pastor would afford. In line with stereotypical visions of the male role (e.g. as breadwinner), this student was told that he should not settle for a low-paying and relatively low-prestige occupational role.

Josh ended up going to college and taking courses in biology. However, he realized that he lacked passion for it. Then, while on a mission trip,

> The leader of the trip kept coming up to me and my friend and asking, "Do you feel like God is calling you to ministry? Have you ever felt that?" I was like "Yeah, I felt it before, but kind of got shut down." He was like, "Just keep pursuing it. Keep thinking about it. God has that in store for your future." Sure enough, at the end of the trip I was convinced.

The challenge Josh confronted from his parents was enough to push him to reconsider, and for a period, to reject, an internally felt call to ministry. According to his account, both the internal feelings he experienced during the mission trip—that he was "exactly where God wanted [him] to be"—and the encouragement and affirmation of the group leader caused him to return to and finally embrace the call to ministry.

Josh took for granted that he *could* serve as a pastor but worried whether it was the right or best choice for him. The women who faced challengers, on the other hand, were told that they *couldn't* be pastors because of their gender. More broadly, these examples demonstrate the potential consequences of challengers to people's sense of calling (see also Broholm 1984). While we do not have data on those who opt not to pursue ministry, it seems plausible from these accounts that challengers, if frequent enough, could cause people to abandon an internally felt call, especially in the absence of positive affirmation.

Codiscerners

Codiscerners are individuals who help students identify the specific content of their call and/or how best to pursue it. While some students described God's initial call as clear and specific—e.g., to be a pastor—others described God's call as more general and relatively vague. Students in the latter category felt called to religious ministry, generally speaking, but were unsure what specific occupational role they were being called to fulfill (e.g., pastor, deacon, chaplain, or teacher). Identifying a particular vocational path within ministry required discernment, a process that, for some students in our sample, was still ongoing. We found that discernment was often described as a social process: students deliberated the content of their call in conversation with religious leaders, mentors, teachers, peers, and/or family members.

Noah, for example, told us that he originally felt called to youth ministry. In recent years, however, he felt a pull toward pastoral ministry, a shift Noah linked to conversations with the senior pastor at his church,

> My senior pastor sat me down and was like, "Noah, I think I see you leading a church one day. And I think sort of a next step for you is to pursue theological training or divinity school." … And so, kind of following that, I had a time where I spoke with some pastors and church planters to further discern what it meant.

The evolution of Noah's call from youth to pastoral ministry and his plans to pursue theological training emerged out of conversations with religious leaders in his community who helped Noah identify and take concrete steps toward enacting his call.

Even students with a clear sense of calling described formative and impactful conversations with mentors, family members, and peers about the steps they needed to take to fulfill their calling –including whether, where, and when to apply to seminary. Daniel, whose call was described above, reported having conversations with his pastor to figure out what steps to take next. Later, when considering what seminary to attend, Daniel reported, "My pastor, when I told him, I said, "[Other seminary] is giving me a lot of money, [Mainline Divinity School]'s giving me a little less." He was like, "[Mainline Divinity School], got to go [Mainline]."" In describing the decision to apply to and attend Mainline Divinity School, many students shared interactions with MDS alumni and/or with mentors who advocated for MDS as the best fit. John, for example, noted, "So my mentor in my candidacy process in undergrad, he's an alumnus of [MDS]. So, he really recommended at least checking out [Mainline]." Codiscerners helped students identify both the content of their call and how and where to pursue it. Since many students arrive at seminary unsure what career path they plan to pursue, faculty, staff, and peers at MDS, along with denominational officials in the candidacy and ordination programs, will likely continue to play formative roles as codiscerners of students' call.

Sources of Social Influence

While the previous sections outline ideal typical social influences on students' sense of calling, it is important to acknowledge that not all social actors were equal in their influence. Those in positions of authority and/or those with high status tended to have a more salient impact. A parent or pastor, for example, who acts as a challenger to a young person's sense of calling is likely to have more impact than an acquaintance or a stranger, as demonstrated by the examples in the section on "Challengers" above. Similarly, the affirmation of a respected mentor may have more impact than that of a peer or acquaintance.

Clergy were the most commonly cited source of influence in students' accounts; 21 students (58 percent) mentioned a pastor or minister in describing their call to ministry. Half of the instigators and all the interpreters mentioned by students were clergy. More than half of students mentioned a clergy person as a source of affirmation (60 percent), and more than half of the exemplars mentioned were religious leaders (60 percent). Of the students who described codiscerners, roughly two-thirds (67 percent) mentioned clergy people. Notably, clergy people often play multiple roles in students' accounts. The same pastor, for example, may serve as an instigator, an affirmer, and a codiscerner at different points in a students' trajectory. In some accounts, however, different clergy people play key roles at different points—for example, a youth minister instigates an initial sense of calling in high school, a female pastor serves as an exemplar while doing campus ministry, and finally, a current or former pastor serves as a codiscerner as the student considers applications to seminary postcollege.

Clergy are clearly important (and in many cases, necessary) for shaping students' sense of calling, but they were not the only sources of influence reported. We also found that familial ties to ministry were both common and impactful. Eleven of the students we spoke with (31 percent) reported having one or more family members involved in professional religious ministry. These individuals played an important role in shaping students' consideration of ministry as a vocational option. Doug, for example, reflected,

> I think that my call has come about more so from my own story. I was raised in a distinctly Christian home. My dad's a mentoring pastor … I realized that I was given the faith in a way that not everyone is. I sensed that God was inviting me to use that to try and communicate the faith … I don't really have a great, supernatural experience. It's just part of my identity. It's not something I can shake.

Being raised by a mentoring pastor in a "distinctly Christian upbringing" provided a foundation of faith within which he experienced a personal call. Rather than a discrete moment or experience of being called by God, Doug described his sense of calling as a fundamental part of his identity that emerged out of his childhood upbringing and early faith life.

David described his call in a similar way, noting, "My entire life I've had some understanding of a call towards ministry." David recalls that even as a young boy, his grandmother encouraged him to pursue ministry (an early instigator): "I remember when I was a small boy in my ma maw's lap and she'd say, '[David], you're going to be my singing preacher boy, ain't you?' I'd say, 'Well yes, ma'am, I am.'" These early prompts to consider ministry as a vocational path were complimented by a clear understanding of what the job entailed and a respect for those who held it. He recalled, "As a child I romanticized pastoral ministry … My grandfather on my father's side was a Methodist pastor for 34 years and I saw how he dealt with his congregations." David's sense of calling is rooted in his early childhood socialization, with family members acting as both instigators and exemplars, enabling his consideration of ministry as a potential (and desirable) vocational path.

For students with familial ties, these connections also provided justification for the reality of their personal call. Tammie, for example, reflected,

> My father is a pastor … My grandmother is an evangelist … My uncle is a pastor. He's married to a woman in the ministry. Another uncle is married to a pastor, so *there's just pastors everywhere* … I didn't have this pressure to be a pastor but it was closer to me than I ever realized. I didn't know that maybe in God's own purpose I'd been groomed … I'd never thought myself to be a pastor … But God has a purpose.

While Tammie says she never felt explicit pressure to become a pastor, she now interprets her upbringing, surrounded by pastors, as additional evidence of God's call—part of a process of grooming and preparing Tammie to become a pastor herself. Sharice shared a similar story,

> I also come from two parents who have been heavily in ministry pretty much all their life. My dad, he is an ordained bishop in the church, and so I *knew* that I would have some form of ministry role in the church. On both sides of my family, my dad and my mom's side, there's a bunch of pastors … It makes sense that that may fall in my lap somehow.

Both Tammie and Sharice suggest that their call to ministry "makes sense" considering their backgrounds. Immersion in a social world with "pastors everywhere" makes ministry a more salient option and a pathway that is more likely to be met with approval by family members. Family members with ties to ministry also play important roles as instigators, interpreters, affirmers, and codiscerners, encouraging students along the path to divinity school.

There is, of course, a broader social context that matters here as well: the religious community (and its associated discourses, practices, and social structures) within and through which a call to ministry experienced. Perhaps unsurprisingly, none of the students we interviewed experienced a call to ministry outside of active involvement in a religious community. For most, their call came during a period of deepening involvement (and often, increasing responsibility) in a community of faith. Beyond pastors and family members, lay leaders, congregational volunteers, and peers were also mentioned as playing important roles in instigating, affirming, and sustaining students' sense of call over time. In many cases, students made general references to the supportive or encouraging voices of "others," broadly defined.

Involvement in a religious community exposes individuals to the idea of God's call, to its socially-normative form, to various roles and positions in ministry, and to a cultural system that imbues those experiences and roles with status (Pitt 2012), creating what others have called a "culture of call" (Carroll 2006) within congregations. Students raised in families with religious leaders, especially the children of pastors and ministers, may also be socialized (in the sense of creating "lasting dispositions or structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant

ways" (Wacquant 2006)) into seeing a career in religious leadership as a desirable vocational path and into the habits and dispositions needed to pursue it. Religious communities also facilitate interactions with a wider range of instigators, exemplars, interpreters, and affirmers that prompt and confirm a sense of calling (Carroll 2006). Notably, then, religious communities not only legitimate but also *enable* individuals to experience a call (from God) to ministry. They provide the plausibility structure (Berger and Luckmann 1966), religious language (Luhrmann 2012), and dispositions (Wacquant 2006) within and through which a call can be experienced.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we identified and analyzed the social actors and interactions that play a formative role in the early stages of seminary students' call to ministry. In doing so, this study extends the "horizontal" call (Pitt 2012), demonstrating how even seemingly personal aspects of a call to ministry (i.e., the "vertical" or "secret" call from God and its initial discernment) are socially structured (Neitz and Spickard 1990). This paper also adds *specificity* to the social embeddedness of called identities by identifying ideal-typical social actors and specific people who play a salient role in the development and solidification of a personal sense of calling.

In line with past research, this study highlights important differences in the social shaping of students' sense of calling by gender (Adams 2007; Lawless 1991; Pitt 2012; Steeves 2017; Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998). Notably, we found that women were more likely to report encounters with challengers and less likely to report both affirmers and personal, direct instigating experiences, compared to men. Twenty years ago, Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang (1998) described similar challenges among women pursuing ordained ministry. They found, for example, that "women professing a call from God … were not well received. They were scorned, told they were overstepping their female role, and considered guilty of lying or pathetic self-delusion" (Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998:98). The authors argued that the "lack of support from people who are important to them may cause women who feel called to ordained ministry to question their own sense of call" (Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998; see also Steeves 2017). In his study of the COGIC tradition, Pitt (2012) found that women were more often instructed to wait for external affirmation of their call before entering the licensing process. Despite some growth in the number of women clergy (Chaves et al. 2021; Knoll and Bolin 2018), our research suggests that these challenges remain relevant to some women seeking ordination today.

Our findings also suggest that exemplars, affirmers, and codiscerners may play a particularly important role in determining whether women see ordained ministry as a possible career path and/or feel empowered to pursue it. Seeing women in a position of religious leadership can be transformative, instigating a personal sense of calling and providing a role model for the work of ministry. This suggests that it is important for students to see someone *like them* in a given position in order to give it serious consideration (Steeves 2017). Our data also suggest that women's instigating experiences tend to be less personalized and more indirect than that of men. This, alongside the higher likelihood of exposure to challengers, may make affirmers particularly consequential in sustaining women's sense of call (Adams 2007; Chang 1997). We found that social relationships also matter for interpreting and discerning the *content* of one's calling. Given that women are less likely to report a call to preach or pursue senior religious leadership positions (Ferguson 2015; Finlay 1996; Pitt 2012), these social influences may be influential sites for reproducing gendered inequities in religious leadership.

While our primary focus in this paper was on gender, future research should attend to differences in the social shaping of call across demographic factors including race, age, sexual orientation, and denomination (Edwards and Oyakawa 2022; McQueeney 2009; Plummer 2021; Robertson 2020). More than 60 years ago, H. Richard Niebhur (1956:63–66), in his study of theological education, argued that different denominations and religious groups at different points

in history have held different aspects of the call to ministry as most important—whether that be the *secret call* (similar to Pitt's "vertical call"), the *providential call* (having the gifts and talents necessary to fulfill the role), or the *ecclesiastical call* (i.e., "the summons and invitations extended to a man [sic] by some community or institution of the Church" [64]). It remains true today that what is considered essential about the call to ministry varies across groups and traditions (Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998). In traditions that emphasize the ecclesiastical call, those who feel called to ministry may be more likely to describe social influences in their narrative accounts.

In this study, for example, we found that Black students, on average, mentioned more types of social influence (3.1) than White students (2.5) in their accounts. Given the correlation between race and denomination in our sample (the majority of Black students were affiliated with Conservative Protestant traditions), this suggests that the social aspects of calling may be of particular importance in these communities.[2] Existing research on calling and ministry among Black clergy and within Black churches strongly suggests that call experiences and stories, including degrees of social influence and meaning of calling itself, may vary by race (Barnes 2006; Edwards and Oyakawa 2022; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Pitt 2012). Much of the existing research on calling, however, tends to focus on a single denomination, religious, or racial group. While our sample size (and space limitations) did not allow us to examine these differences here, this is an important area for additional research. Comparative studies across denominations and demographic categories can help illuminate other variations in the social shaping of calling.

Our study also has implications for research on secular callings and career discernment. In recent decades, researchers have begun to investigate the prevalence and impact of holding a "call orientation"—in contrast to a "job" or "career" orientation—toward one's occupational role (see Dik and Shimizu 2019; Duffy and Dik 2013; Thompson and Bunderson 2019 for recent reviews). While this work has acknowledged the importance of social factors like context and culture in shaping a sense of calling and/or purpose, the specific actors and interactions that play a formative role remain undertheorized (see Bloom, Colbert, and Nielsen 2021 for a recent exception). We suspect that professionals in fields such as law, medicine, and education, may also describe actors who play roles similar to the instigators, affirmers, codiscerners, and challengers described here. We also suspect that familial ties to a profession play an important role in shaping and facilitating how they understand their work and that gender and other social identities—including race, religion, and sexuality—play an important role in the construction of a "professional calling" (Donley 2021; Karunanayake and Nauta 2004; Lockwood 2006). We encourage additional research on the antecedents and maintenance of call orientations with particular attention to these social factors.

This framework for analyzing call and the specific findings outlined in this paper have implications for the study of human meaning-making in other contexts as well. Interest in "purpose" and forming purposeful students, for example, has grown considerably in recent decades across both religious and secular educational institutions (Clydesdale 2016; Damon 2009). This literature, too, points to the importance of relationships and social contexts in the formation and maintenance of a sense of purpose (Ammerman 2017; Clydesdale 2016). We expect that the ideal typical social influences outlined in this article also play a role in helping young people identify, articulate, and sustain a sense of identity and purpose in other educational settings and occupational fields. We hope that this article will inspire future work to attend to these influences and also to gendered patterns in their prevalence and impact.

This paper has several limitations. First, in analyzing the social influences on students' sense of calling, we took an empirical approach to their call stories; in other words, we treated them as

[2]We also found that no Black students mentioned challengers in their call stories. It is difficult to say, however, whether this reflects empirical reality or narrative choice. Black students at Methodist Divinity School may be less likely to discuss challengers than their White counterparts, especially to White interviewers.

realistic representations of how their call experience/s and pathways to divinity school unfolded. However, we also recognize that storytelling and narratives are themselves religious practices (Wuthnow 2011), and that call stories in particular are likely to be shaped by social norms and shared scripts for telling the story of God's call in different communities (Lawless 1991; Williams 2013). The inclusion of social influences in students' accounts, for example, may reflect the emphasis on external affirmation of God's call in many religious traditions (Naidu and Nzuza 2013; Pitt 2012; Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang 1998). In fact, several students explicitly acknowledged that social affirmation was a normative component of an authentic (and socially legitimate) call experience. Christopher, for example, told us that he was "a firm believer that affirmation, biblically speaking, is very important in calling … it gives more credence." Similarly, gender may shape the content of students' call stories. Lawless (1991), for example, found that women tended to describe an initial reluctance to accept the call and reported "testing" God for validation of their call. Doing so, Lawless argues, helps reinforce the authenticity and legitimacy of God's call. We suggest that future research attend to both ways of conceptualizing accounts of calling—as empirical descriptions and as narrative accounts—as they reveal different ways in which calling is socially structured.

Second, we examined students' sense of calling at a single moment in time. However, we expect that students' sense of calling will evolve and shift as they move through seminary and into their early careers. In fact, we found that many students *anticipated* change throughout the life course (Ferguson and Packard 2022). Longitudinal research is needed to better document when and how people's sense of calling changes over time and to what effect (Dik and Shimizu 2019; Duffy and Dik 2013). Research suggests that some clergy find it difficult to sustain a sense of their work as a "calling" as the role becomes increasingly professionalized (Christopherson 1994) or in the face of on-the-job challenges such as congregational conflict (Ferguson and Packard 2022; Joynt 2018). If we take seriously the idea that calling is a *sense*, as it is often described, future research should consider what factors, including social interactions as well as spiritual practices, institutional policies, workplace experiences, and demographic variables, sustain this sense over the longer durée.

To conclude, by emphasizing the social factors shaping the call to ministry, we do not mean to imply that calling is inconsequential. The socially situated nature of the call experience does not negate or mitigate its very real and important consequences for the callee's beliefs, actions, and/or career trajectory. Religious experiences, like a call from God, provide the foundation for religious commitment and belonging (James 1905; Joas 2000; Luhrmann 2012), giving rise to commitments that are "portable" beyond the experience itself and can inform future lines of action (Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). But callings are embodied experiences (Merleau-Ponty 2013) and the social world shapes the available categories and lenses through which people's experiences of calling emerge (Fourcade and Healy 2017; Taves 2009). In this process, social interactions and contexts play a vital role. While the call to ministry is felt to be a deeply personal experience, it does not exist apart from religious institutions and social relationships that enable people to imagine their constellation of human experiences as a calling.

Statement on Replication

Data and codebooks for this research study will not be made publicly available. The IRB restricts the public sharing of data collected from university-affiliated students. The interview guide, however, is included as an online supplement.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Supplementary information