Introduction

And He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11–12 (NKJV)

Be ready for whatever happens because it’s going to be a long journey, it’s going to be a tough journey, and it’s not going to be easy.

Jeff, Licensed Minister

Consider three professionals:

First, Adam. At thirty, Adam’s youthful indiscretions caught up with him and he was incarcerated. While in prison, Adam acquired something of a layman’s sense of the law by reading books in the prison library. He was able to gain enough rudimentary knowledge to serve as a kind of “jailhouse lawyer,” informally helping other inmates understand basic legal matters related to their sentences. It was there that he began to feel something of a call. As he describes it, “I felt a lot of pleasure in that. Not self-gratification. Purpose.” Upon his release, Adam spent his weekends volunteering at a growing neighborhood law firm. It was there that his decision to practice law matured. He approached the head of the firm with his intentions, arguing that he felt a strong pull to serve men like him: men who had made bad decisions but who deserved a second chance. Adam pursued a part-time apprenticeship in the law firm. Within a year, the head of the firm was delegating significant responsibilities to him. Three years later, Adam was named as chief operating officer at the law firm. The firm’s senior partner presents cases in court, but Adam is trusted with day-to-day mentoring and management of the firm’s lawyers. He holds a key role in the firm, yet everything he learned about law, he learned there; he’s never been to law school. Adam has only a high school diploma.
Unlike Adam, Seth received a considerable amount of formal education. As a young man he had never considered himself a particularly good student. In fact, he joked about the fears he had bringing his report card home to his well-educated parents, a high school principal and an English professor at a nearby historically black college. Upon his graduation from high school he attended the local university to pursue a degree in accounting. After some setbacks in his educational career, in his junior year he took some courses in literature and creative writing at the suggestion of his father. He was surprised at both his interest in and, even more surprisingly, his aptitude for the material. In his words, “things clicked for me there. I probably never realized how much I liked it because, I don’t know, because that’s what my parents did.” After receiving his accounting degree, Seth pursued a doctorate in English but ran into a difficult labor market. Unable to find a professorial position, he sought employment elsewhere. Three years after receiving his PhD, Seth is satisfied with managing a household electronics store, only occasionally guest-lecturing in his father’s English classes.

Eve was also well educated. Unlike the two men, she has always known what she wanted to do. Even as a young girl, her interest in medicine was clear to anyone who knew her well. No one was surprised when she ignored her father’s assertions that “women don’t make good doctors” and became a pre-med major in college. Upon graduating, she pursued a master’s degree in public health while working part-time as a medical transcriptionist. While she considered staying in the public health field, she felt that God had something different in store for her: “I began to hear a voice in my spirit. The voice said, clearly and simply, ‘heal.’” She enrolled in one of the top medical schools in the country, earning accolades from her professors for her strong work in their classes and her obvious talents with patients. She passed her exams with flying colors, scoring higher than any of the men in her cohort. Today, Eve is caring for patients as a licensed nurse-practitioner because of a long-standing belief in her religious community that only men can be physicians.

The stories of these legal, educational, and medical professionals may puzzle us because we expect professionals to have significant levels of professional training, to actively seek and gain employment in their chosen field, and to be able to be credentialed regardless of ascribed characteristics like gender. These three accounts are meant to offer insight into the unusual status of many members of a different profession: the clergy. In fact, Adam, Seth, and Eve are three clergy members in the African American Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC). Their true stories
reveal a problematic set of facts for any scholar seeking to understand this vocational identity.

Adam felt a call to ministry while assisting with prison Bible studies. He is now ordained and serves as an associate minister in the COGIC. He holds this position in spite of the fact that he has never been to seminary or taken even one college course. He learned to operate in ministry under the tutelage of his church’s senior pastor. The well-educated son of a pastor, Seth received his call to ministry in college. Seminary-trained, ordained, and licensed as a church elder, he cannot find employment as a pastor or even as an associate pastor in the denomination. Instead, he works full time as a social worker, hoping a clerical opportunity will present itself. Eve has felt a call to ministry from childhood, maintaining that interest through her years in college as first a religious studies and then divinity school student. She serves as an unordained lay-minister in the denomination, which bars women from ordained leadership. She is surprisingly content with her status, indicating no interest in a higher formal position.

Even without seminary training (Adam), clerical employment (Seth), or ordination (Eve), these three ministers describe themselves as “the elect,” as “the called,” and as “clergy.” One of the black boxes plaguing religious, occupational, and identity scholarship has been the idea of a “divine calling,” which distinguishes clergy, both at the vocational level and at the identity level, from other professionals. It has become an accepted premise that people often feel a particular pull (or push?) into ministry that is different from the forces that lead people into other professions. As the theologian William Myers points out in his study of the call to ministry among some African American clergy, “This may be one of the important differences in how churches view the call as a vocation when compared to other secular vocations. Whereas one may choose—for economic or other reasons—other secular vocations, one is chosen for the ministry.” But how do these men and women know they’re chosen? And once chosen, how do they maintain a sense of themselves as “the chosen” in the absence of the most conventional markers of the clerical identity: religious training, employment, and credentials?

This book draws on a series of more than one hundred in-depth interviews with Pentecostal African American ministers to examine how these men and women defend their identities as clergy in light of the educational deficiencies, constrained labor market, and gender discrimination that threatens both the legitimacy and the pursuit of those identities. I argue that defending unconventional expressions of an identity—in this case, the clergy—requires two activities. First, the claimant must stake a convincing claim to at least one rec-
ognizable marker of the identity. For clergy, that marker is the “call to minis-
try,” a phenomenon explained in great detail in this book. Second, the claim-
ant must exploit the gaps inadvertently left in institutionalized understandings
of these identities. In spite of layers of organizational meaning and mandate,

enough ambiguity exists to grant these men and women the space to find their

own understandings of what clergy need, what clergy do, and who clergy are.

We’ll see that ministers use the following strategies to negotiate the afore-
mentioned structural handicaps: claiming a different source for clerical knowl-

edge, embracing a different look and location for clerical work, and choosing to

recognize a different standard for clerical legitimacy. These strategies not only

produce opportunities to meaningfully inhabit the identity of a cleric, but they

also produce new understandings of the forms that identity might take.

Understanding the Clergy: Why It Matters

Both scholarly and popular interest in the clergy has always been high, but

lately we have seen a surge in curiosity about the clergy prompted in great

part by clerical malfeasance, and clerical involvement in secular and political

arenas. A clergy shortage in Catholicism and major mainstream Protestant
denominations has served as a catalyst for another trend in scholarly exam-

inations of the clergy. Recent books have taken readers inside churches to

show how organizations that license and employ religious professionals are

beginning to rethink who these professionals might be. Most book-length
treatments on the question of calling reflect scholarly interest in the question
of the congregational call to ministry, probing institutions to determine who

can be called, what claimants are called to do, and how that call is to be certi-
fied. Most of this interest has centered on the ordination of women and the

Roman Catholic Church’s formal recognition of unordained “lay-ministers.”

This book emphasizes the agency of religious professionals themselves

in reconceptualizing clericalism in terms of these same dynamics of “who,”

what,” and “how.” This emphasis allows us to extend established scholarly

approaches to understanding the clergy and the clerical identity by forc-
ing us to reconsider (1) some methodological, definitional, and theoretical
dilemmas posed by narrow preconceptions about who the clergy are, (2)
what matters along the way to that identity, and (3) what we can expect to
see from those who claim it. With these reconsiderations in mind, there are
three questions that serve as a framework for this book. Who are the called?
What is a calling? How is the called-identity defended in the absence of pro-
fessional knowledge, professional employment, or professional credentials?

6 | part i: introduction
Who the Called Are: A Methodological Problem

Of the four characteristics—altruism, authority, autonomy, and abstract expertise—that social scientists use to separate professions from other occupations, none has survived empirical scrutiny better than the last of these: professionals’ almost monopolistic control of abstract knowledge. Many occupations require proficiency in a set of skills or procedures as a condition of entry into their trade. Both professionals and other workers in the fields of law, medicine, and divinity share this characteristic. Lawyers and paralegals must be able to draft contracts, physicians and nurses can systematically obtain medical histories, and priests and deacons serve as administrators of congregations. But what separates the professionals from what might best be described as “paraprofessionals” is the claim that the professionals have mastered a body of esoteric knowledge, knowledge to which neither clients nor paraprofessionals are privy. While medicine and law have settled on an expectation that this competence in esoteric bodies of knowledge can be gained only in formal institutions of learning, there has been and continues to be considerable disagreement about the source of this special competence for clergy. Yet, when scholars seek samples of those who are in pursuit of clerical credentials, they almost always approach what seems to be a logical source for data: seminaries and Bible colleges. This approach enables us to only partially account for the role training might play in the strength of one’s sense that one is equipped to “do ministry.”

Second, while research on religious professionals has been a staple of occupations research since the 1930s, relatively few studies have explored the subjective meaning of religious work for those who, while licensed/ordained, don’t practice their craft in pastoral offices. This book disrupts that meme by focusing on ministers who, for a host of reasons, are not serving in a pastoral or priestly office. It also explains how the “called” frame their clerical aspirations when institutional and personal characteristics hinder their access to professional positions. As licensed and ordained ministers, my respondents see themselves as much a part of the clerical “profession” as any church pastor or other presbyter. That said, very few of them currently hold or are likely to ever hold full-time pastoral appointments. Nevertheless, they maintain a vocational identity even as they express it in what a scholarly observer might perceive as avocational behavior. Adding these voices to the literature affords us a better understanding of the way in which clerical identity might inhabit a different space from other professional identities, as something other than just a vocational or occupational title.
Finally, previous research on what I term “new clericalism” suffers from a too-narrow focus on the issue of ordaining and placing women in full-time clerical positions. While ultimately feminist in its origins, this line of inquiry privileges paid labor as work in a way that countermands a feminist theory of labor, one that seeks to include unpaid labor and labor not located exclusively in the public sphere as part of our understanding of work. Much of this emphasis is based on the essentialist assumption that all male clergy either work or seek work as paid professionals and, therefore, so must all women who are drawn to religious labor. This book overcomes the problematic tendency of much feminist scholarship on the clergy to assume a priori that discrimination in terms of ordination processes denies women in some denominations access to both the work and the status of clergy. With rich empirical data on the thoughts and experiences of women who are called to, operating in, but not formally ordained for, ministry, we find empirical support for claims that meaningful variation exists in how women make sense of, justify, and value other approaches to religious labor.

What a Calling Is: A Definitional Problem

In his classic definition of the call to ministry, the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr speaks of the call as a “secret.” Niebuhr, best known for his serenity prayer, describes the call as “that inner persuasion or experience whereby a person feels himself directly summoned or invited by God to take up the work of the ministry.”8 This call is not the general call to discipleship that all Christians might claim or the ecclesiastical (or congregational) call that serves to confirm, rather than initiate, one’s belief that they are to engage in the work of the ministry.9 The “secret call” is a crisis moment where the response is unrelated to the promise of either future benefits (e.g., eternal life) or current ones (e.g., a paycheck). Instead, the response should be one of obedience and a spirit of duty to God—the source of the charge. Is this an accurate picture of a call? What are people called to do? What form do these callings take?

How one finds entry into ministry as a vocation and what one understands that vocation to be is as much a sociological question as a theological one. In the stories that people tell about how they came to be “chosen” for this particular vocation—a story that few people outside of a religious context ever feel compelled to share—can be found a description of and an accounting for the social action and social identity that is born from this
experience. A phenomenological perspective suggests that religious communities are embedded in the common everyday society, but that they have their own meanings, which are not shared by other people and other circumstances. This idea of a calling to a kind of labor (i.e., ministry) may be both defined by and limited to this social microcosm.

Most Protestant denominations affirm the idea that there must be a specific encounter with God that leads people to devote their lives to ministry. This moment, the “call to ministry,” is essential to many ministers’ beliefs that they are legitimate vessels for God’s work. Unlike ordination processes, which are explicitly social in nature, call-experiences are almost always described as a personal journey where the only other participant is God. Most studies of Protestant clergy recognize that the call-to-ministry is an important part of the credentialing process, but they tend to gloss over it, focusing instead on the more easily analyzed institutional processes. Yet this moment is the foundation for everything that follows it. The call-experience is more than a catalyst for the pursuit of a professional credential; it is an essential plank in the argument for legitimacy, especially when other more verifiable evidence is in short supply. Therefore, comprehending the call-experience is a critical component of understanding its impact on both the decision to pursue and the decision to embrace a ministerial identity.

How a Called Identity Is Derived and Defended: A Theoretical Problem

As a graduate student, I taught undergraduate courses. In order to make a point about the power of expectations and symbols, I would occasionally come to the first day of class dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and sit near the back of the sixty-student classroom, notebook open, and wait for students to file in. We’d sit there for the customary ten-minute window that students have been primed to wait, and then I’d watch as the first few students looked around and started making their way to the exits. Only then did I announce myself as the instructor for the class. A useful conversation would then ensue about what students expected a professor to look like and how they expected a professor to behave: professors arrive on time, can be found in the front of the class, and they wear “professor-appropriate” clothing. When I conducted this exercise in my sociology of gender class, some students would suggest that they expected the professors to be female. Regardless of the class, one or two students would shyly point out their expectation that the professor would be white. They didn’t recognize me as “professor” because I didn’t meet their expectations.
Social scientists believe the social world operates on what the sociologist Erving Goffman refers to as “systems of enabling conventions.”10 We understand each other and, ultimately, ourselves based on the “normative consensus” that forms around idealized performances of roles and identities. While most of my students might have differing opinions on whether a professor wears a tweed jacket or just a shirt and tie, not nearly as many would expect one to wear a T-shirt and jeans, and practically none would expect a clown suit with a cowboy hat. It may be true that students might find me more likeable and approachable in jeans, but it is formal or professional dress that they expect and reward with perceptions of credibility, intelligence, and competence.11

Even without the empirical evidence of the role that appearance plays in shaping people’s evaluations of our vocational identity, professors know to dress in accordance with certain conventions. Though other structural markers of my “professor-ness” are available to students—I’m in the front of the room, the syllabus has “Dr. Pitt” written at the top of it—I know that I enhance my performance of the professor role simply by putting on a tie and a tweed jacket. I don’t just know the conventions; I rely on them in an attempt to successfully impress upon my students that I am who I claim to be.

In recognition of this tendency, Goffman says we put on a “front.” That is, in these performances, we bring to bear a number of concrete/abstract props (or “expressions”) in the service of defining ourselves for observers.12 The best fronts conform to convention, thereby standardizing our performance so that the audience has something to hang their expectations on. Goffman’s use of the term “performance” in his description of our “presentation of self in everyday life” gives the impression that these fronts are part of an attempt to mislead. While an argument can be made that this is not the case, it is important to consider the fact that some actors might, in fact, use their performances to mislead, particularly if the benefits of that deception may increase their status or access to other advantages. This possibility is especially relevant in the case of the clergy.

Much of the clerical identity is tied up in its credibility. The nearly universal Protestant requirement that ministerial aspirants claim a supernatural calling is an important component of establishing intention. Ultimately, the authority of the clerical identity doesn’t reside in the practice of it; its authority comes just from being named to it by God. In lieu of applying some supernatural gift of discernment (that few credentialing bodies claim to have), a conventional calling story helps to verify the integrity and honesty of one’s pursuit of clerical credentials.
This book is not focused on divining the veracity of ministers’ claims to the ministerial identity. Goffman offers some advice for why taking that approach might ultimately be a fruitless exercise: “Whether an honest performer wishes to convey the truth or whether a dishonest performer wishes to convey a falsehood, both must take care to enliven their performances with appropriate expressions, exclude from their performances expressions that might discredit the impression being fostered, and take care lest the audience impute unintended meanings.” Whether trying to deceive or not, clerical aspirants likely recognize the conventions surrounding the clerical identity and, as any smart performer should be, are careful to use those conventions to maintain a credible performance. But what happens when those conventions aren’t available?

While I did observe some of my respondents’ performances as ministers, this book focuses primarily on their responses to a number of questions about their understanding of themselves as clergy. These conversations about their clerical identities, while much more comprehensive, reproduced the interviews many had had with their pastors at the beginning of their formal pursuit of the identity. At the outset of each interview, the ministers were informed of my own upbringing in their denomination. My asking them to tell me about their calling, as a presumed cultural insider, put me in the place of friendly interrogator in the same way that their pastor’s request might have done years before. The open-ended nature of that first part of my investigation gave my respondents the opportunity to wrap themselves in the conventions of the clerical identity. This engagement gave me an opportunity to learn what conventions they deem relevant in the experience—or at least a description of the experience—of a call to the ministry.

These interviews were not only a chance for the respondents to describe themselves as clergy but also an opportunity to defend their belief that they indeed have this identity. In legitimating their status as clergy, they had to prove that they were who they claimed to be. This defense was complicated by the absence of conventional explanations. Goffman posits that “to be a given kind of person . . . is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one’s social grouping attaches thereto.” Providing details of their possession of the required attribute—a calling—is certainly part of their defense. But in addition to those expressed in the narratives, there exist other sets of conventions about clerical conduct and “appearance” that we, as a society, also attach to our expectations of the clerical identity. As discussed, three of those conventions are seminary or other substantial religious training, paid employment as a religious professional, and the attainment
of the credential (ordination) that separates clergy from congregants. In all but a few cases, these ministers could not use these conventions as part of the “clerical front” they were trying to depict. My asking them about this inconsistency, as a social scientist, put me in the place of hostile interrogator, a role few of my respondents had encountered formally, though many have had to deal with such challenges in informal conversations with friends, family members, and peers both in and out of the denomination. Their answers help us to better understand an issue not commonly engaged in our understanding of clerical, and other, identities: in the absence of conventional evidence, how do people make a credible case for their identity? We will see that the flexibility present in practically every aspect of this denomination’s practice and principles allows these men and women ample room to stretch the boundaries of their own, and ultimately the denomination’s, definition of “conventional clergy.”

Sample and Methodology

The analysis in this book is based on my observation of and in-depth interviews with 115 ministers and ministry aspirants in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the largest Pentecostal denomination in North America. Its six million parishioners also make COGIC the largest of the Black Christian denominations. With its paradoxically presbyterian, episcopal, and congregational form of polity, COGIC has a distinctive structure for entry into ministry. Each ecclesiastical jurisdiction has considerable representation of men and women at all the stages in this ministerial “career ladder.” This combination makes it an ideal source for examining the differences in people’s responses to ministerial callings.

My respondents included people at all stages of the “call to ministry.” This includes men holding the offices available to them (Aspiring Ministers, Licensed Ministers, Elders, Pastors, and Bishops) and women holding the offices available to them (Aspiring Missionaries, Deaconesses, Missionaries, Evangelists, and Chaplains). The sample was drawn from four ecclesiastical jurisdictions, one in the Northeast and three in the Southeast, which are the organizing bodies of this religious tradition. The sample varies on a number of characteristics including age, gender, marital status, education, and of course, stage in their pursuit of licensing.

Because the call is a very personal and self-reflective experience, the interviews initially took on the form of testimony as the respondents shared their experiences without my direction. In order to capture the subjectivity and individuality of the informant’s self-understanding of his or her call, each
minister was asked the same initial question, “Would you tell me about your call,” and was then given an opportunity to tell his or her story without interruption. This approach, drawn both from anthropological and social psychological methodology, enabled me to get a sense of calling from the “native’s point of view.” The words “ministry,” “vocation,” “calling,” and “called” may have very different meanings based on both a person’s ascribed characteristics and on their affiliations. Intersubjective meanings become shared within a subpopulation and can be coded in the narratives expressed by members of that subpopulation. We can then focus on that narrative as the place where self-concept is constructed, justified, and maintained. The second part of each interview took the form of a more structured interview with questions intended to discover how the respondents express their call and where they believe legitimation of the call lies. My data analysis consisted of carefully reading interviews, exploring and coding responses, and allowing themes, issues, and answers to emerge during the process.

Studying God

In a 1994 essay in the New York Times Magazine, the Catholic priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley wrote that “religion is experience, image, and story before it is anything else and after it is everything else.” In these words, Greeley exposes readers to sociology’s growing sense that religion’s strength lies fundamentally within individuals’ experiences with something unexplainable, the images and symbols that give meaning to those experiences, and the stories we use to preserve them.

As important as religious experience is to many people’s lives—but after all, more than 80 percent of Americans believe God answers prayers—social scientists’ training provides us neither the tools nor the appetite for serious attempts at understanding how explicitly supernatural phenomena operate. While I occasionally joke that some of the unexplained variance in sociological phenomena might be reduced if we could throw “God” into the regression equation, as a sociologist I am inclined to believe that human behavior is informed by some other socially structured behavioral trigger. These forces can be observed, and as a result it is religious behavior, not religious experience, that tends to draw our attention.

That said, whatever weight one attaches to the need for researchers to be able to observe supernatural phenomena, we cannot ignore these “breaches of the reality of ordinary life,” as the sociologist Peter Berger refers to them. For many, their religious experiences are part and parcel of their ordi-
nary life. The sociologists Nancy Ammerman, Tim Nelson, Omar McRoberts, and others posit that religious people’s real or imagined interactions with the sacred—be they *mysterium tremendum* or *mysterium fascinans*—have real implications for their social attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes.¹⁸ This research supports these assertions.

My informants’ descriptions of conversations with God were treated no differently from their descriptions of conversations with their pastors *about* those conversations with God. Sitting through more than 150 hours of conversation, I respected each minister’s experience as truth, taking Rodney Stark’s advice that a basic framework for research like this “sociology of the Gods” must be a recognition that for my ministers, like members of many religious traditions, God is a person with whom they can, should, and do interact.¹⁹

As an analyst of these conversations, I approach each case as if the religious experience happened as described, bringing what tools sociology and psychology offer to uncover how culture, context, and community might inform or affirm those experiences. I endeavored to maintain a position of phenomenological epoché, that is, an analytic stance that “brackets” or suspends any of the biases I might bring to this project as a representative of either my scientific or religious community.²⁰ Therefore, this book is not a scientific attempt to either prove or disprove the existence of God. Similarly, I don’t seek to divine—through scientific method or any other technique—whether God calls people to ministry generally, or if God called any of my respondents specifically. That said, it was clear to me that if God is operating in the lives of these men and women, He’s apparently wise enough to use the cultural tools of symbol, image, and story endemic to these religious communities to capture their attention.

**Plan of the Book**

The chapters that follow are arranged in four sections. The first chapter provides a foundational background. Chapters 2 and 3 offer descriptions and analysis of the birth of a called clerical identity. Chapters 4 through 6 examine how my respondents negotiated and maintained this identity given the structural obstacles that threaten both its legitimacy and its practice. The final part concludes with some reflections on the intersection of personal and congregational calls, and the need for social scientists to begin to reconsider our definition and understanding of the clergy.

Specifically, chapter 1 provides an introduction to the Church of God in Christ, offering brief glimpses of its one-hundred-year history, from its hum-
ble beginnings in a borrowed cotton gin to its current position as the largest Pentecostal denomination in North America. Drawing primarily on secondary sources, the chapter provides some context to the stories explored in the rest of the book and depicts what is distinctive about this denomination as both a Black and a Pentecostal denomination, highlighting both its differences and similarities with its peers.

Chapter 2 lays out the findings of previous research on the call to religious labor. While there is a long legacy of scholarship examining religious labor, the focus has been on the impact of secularization, de-professionalization, and stress on the lives of professional clergy. While some of that research will be brought to bear in this book, the emphasis here is on the sequence of events that led to these former layperson's decisions to become ministers. After laying out this background, the chapter turns to a systematic description of the accounts of my informants' calls to the ministry.

Drawing on both participant observation and interviews, chapter 3 offers a glimpse into the role originating congregations play in enhancing the very strong beliefs ministers have that they have been called to religious labor. It examines processes that, when examined through a social psychological lens, explain why even clearly noncompetent candidates continue to pursue the credential. In particular, it shows how religious communities' reluctance to directly reject ministers' sense that they are called inadvertently strengthens aspirants' commitments to the called identity.

Chapter 4 focuses on the ways in which these ministers legitimate their sense of themselves as clergy in spite of a nearly complete absence of what we have come to believe is an essential feature of religious credentialing: Bible school, divinity school, or seminary training. This chapter examines my respondents' assertion that their special competence as ministers comes not from any particular training (which they often deride), but instead through what they call “the anointing.” The chapter describes how ministers explain this anointing, detailing the complex ways they say the anointing operates within them as a resource, rendering their lack of seminary training irrelevant. It also demonstrates how many of these ministers denigrate educational credentialing as an illegitimate means of certifying one's calling, thereby claiming less easily challenged evidence of their position as religious laborers.

Most men and women are unlikely to find full-time paid positions in their local COGIC churches. Chapter 5 explains why this is the case and how this situation handicaps opportunities to serve in the kinds of positions, even as unpaid laborers, where their peers in other denominations might be found. It shows how they construct a new framework for understanding religious
labor in order to legitimate their continued secular employment. It argues that the rhetorics these ministers deploy in talking about their secular work and their calls to ministry help them overcome the structural constraints that might otherwise hinder a coherent sense of themselves as religious laborers.

Chapter 6 seeks to give voice to a set of ministers who have until now been absent from the samples informing our understanding of the clerical identity. Church of God in Christ women are missing from most studies of clergy because that institution continues to bar women from ordained ministry. This chapter examines the complex relationship between the church’s rules against women’s leadership and the various means by which female ministers continue to pursue their call to religious leadership positions. They, even more than men, find ways to exploit the zones of ambiguity present in institutional mandates intended to constrain their opportunities.

Taken as a whole, this book offers a better understanding of a phenomenon that is so ordinary that we’ve come to take it for granted, and yet so extraordinary that even theologians struggle with ways to measure or find meaning in it. Ultimately, I hope you will come away from this text with a clearer sense of how, in the innovative hands of these religious actors, the Brobdingnagian forces of discrimination and social structure interact with the personal complexities of faith and identity to promote new meanings and new opportunities for religious labor.