

THESIS

WHEN WORK IS WORSHIP: STUDYING IDENTIFICATION AND FAITH IN CHURCH
WORKERS

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Autumn (Buzzetta) Neal

Department of Communication Studies

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Master's Committee

Advisor: Elizabeth Williams

Meara Faw

Bryan Dik

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ABSTRACT

WHEN WORK IS WORSHIP: STUDYING IDENTIFICATION AND FAITH IN CHURCH WORKERS

This thesis assesses the relationship between faith, organizational identification (OI), spiritual labor, and burnout in ex-church workers. The impetus for my study came from media (Cospers, 2021; Barr, 2021; Du Mez, 2021) and research (Chappell et al., 2022; Garner & Peterson, 2018; McNamee, 2011) that critically addresses destructive practices in church work. Using a qualitative, phenomenological methodology, I conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews of those who have left their positions in the church. I analyzed the data using Tracy's (2020) phronetic-iterative coding approach and Saldaña's (2021) coding recommendations. My findings revealed five key themes: identities in tension, faith as expectation, forced separation, balancing authenticity, and learned solutions. Ultimately, I contribute to research on organizational identification by problematizing enmeshment and over-identification. I conceptualize the faithful face as a balance of authenticity and boundaries in church work. Additionally, I offer contributions to discourses of spiritual labor and implications for studying faith-based organizations. Finally, I address practical implications, limitations, and future directions.

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Introduction

I literally remember a pastor that I worked for once say, 'I would rather burn out than burn up,' as in as the pastor, it was better for me to burn out than for myself to go to hell, or for other people in my church to go to hell because I didn't work enough.

--Marty, Church Planter

Challenging, inauthentic, and traumatic—these are all ways church workers described their experience when their place of work is also their place of worship. The quote above is a memorable message one participant received when going into church work. Not only was burnout common, it was justified. Marty's experience is just one example of the salient issues within church work. This study was created to explore similar experiences and investigate how Christian churches treat their workers. Over the years, I developed an interest in how one's religion intersects with their communication practices, specifically in a faith-based organizational setting. I wondered if faith proves to be an advantageous, meaning-making tool or if it is exploited for overwork. Stories from peers, along with a rise of popular media (Cosper, 2021a; Du Mez, 2021; Barr, 2021) calling out Christian church practices, inspired me to examine church worker experiences more thoroughly through the lens of organizational communication and personal faith. My aim is to explore the lived experiences of those that were part of religious organizations through a phenomenological study of church workers and assess what happens when their faith intersects with their organizational identification.

Lately, there has been a rise in popular media critiquing church culture. The U.S., Christian church has been the center of attention in recent years with investigative journalism, theological commentaries, and popular Twitter exchanges. Podcasts like *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* (Cosper, 2021a), books like *Jesus and John Wayne* (Du Mez, 2021), and trending hashtags like #exvangelical on social media platforms are not just social commentary, but point

to a deeper, spiritual issue: There are pervasive problems that need addressing in Christian churches.

To be more specific, *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* is an investigative journalism podcast that made its debut in June of 2021. Hosted by Cosper (2021a), it details the spiritual abuse that occurred at Mars Hill Church, a faith-based organization that has already received plenty of attention by communication scholars (Schnabel, 2015; Garner & Peterson, 2018; Peterson & Garner, 2018; Spradley & Spradley, 2020). The podcast explores the history of megachurches, the effects of spiritual abuse on church members, toxic masculinity, church culture, power imbalances, and more by storytelling and allowing past members and employees to share their experiences on air. For example, one ex-member of this church said: “when abuse is done by a pastor...it means that God has been dragged into it, and He is on the side of the abuser. I really don’t have words for the kind of damage that does for the soul” (Cosper, 2021b). Cosper’s (2021a) podcast then gave impetus for other members of spiritually abusive organizations to share their stories and increased public awareness for the power that churches can have over their employees and members. These podcasts, books, and discourses have thus pointed to a salient public issue about religion’s controlling and destructive effects. Based on the stories from Mars Hill (Cosper, 2021a), personal accounts from Barr (2021), and the widespread power religion has (DuMez, 2021), there is pertinent evidence that people are actively being harmed or abused in their churches. This phenomenon alone makes the experiences of church workers a worthy and important topic to study, to both give voice to those who have been hurt and to point out ways to address this prevalent harm.

Research from other communication scholars (Garner & Peterson, 2018; McNamee & Gould, 2018) has called out the messy, traumatic experiences that are unfortunately common in

church life. Not only are these salient issues for academic study, but they are pervasive problems that harm church members and workers alike. It is valuable to point out issues in the church as they occur, rather than a retrospective rebuke when the church falls from grace. In this study, I examine the lived experiences of ex-church workers and explore their churches' actions—to see what is helpful and what is harmful.

Studying religious communication is not a new topic, nor is exploring the Christian church. In fact, *Communication Studies* featured a special edition that “address[es] the salience of spirituality for personal and organizational sense-making and the constructions of multiple, simultaneous, and, in some cases, incompatible realities” (Buzzanell & Harter, 2006, p. 2). Other publications like the *Journal of Communication and Religion*, *Journal of Media & Religion*, and *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, among others, prominently feature the study of faith and religious spaces. Moreover, there are continued calls to bring organizational studies to nontraditional contexts rather than just for-profit businesses (Garner, et al., 2016; Lewis, 2005).

While religious scholars have offered theological solutions to the issues they see in faith-based organizations (such as implementing spiritual practices, like prayer, to solve issues), researchers cannot ignore the role of communication. As McNamee (2011) affirms, “organizational communication scholars are uniquely positioned to offer practical insight into this disconnect, at times, between one’s individual religious/spiritual identity and those identities tied to religious or faith-based organizations (e.g., church member/employee)” (p. 423). Approaching these tensions from an organizational communication standpoint provides another distinct layer of theoretical and practical implications. Moreover, a phenomenological approach (Tracy, 2020) digs into the unique lived experiences of church workers and how they discursively negotiate identity disconnects.

While there are many lenses to explore spiritual exploitation for church workers, a phenomenological study of organizational identification and faith is a good place to start. Specifically, examining the experiences of church employees from an organizational identification perspective to see how faith influences their experiences within their workplace is valuable for not just academic purposes, but also practical applications. Organizational identification occurs when an employee develops a specific attachment to the organization that implies a *oneness* between themselves and the organization (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). While this identification can be seen as desirable and promotes satisfaction and meaning, the dark side of organizational identification explains that a worker may become over-identified with their work and be completely consumed by it (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). Even more, one may encounter competing identifications that, when put in conflict, create “a sense of torment or conflict” (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004, p. 10). This study seeks to explore how faith may complicate one’s organizational identification. For example, are employees more willing to accept manipulation because of their faith more empowered to call out exploitation because it contradicts their faith, or is the answer somewhere in between?

Moreover, the notion of the over-identified worker in a faith-based organization is pervasive in many stories of church work. As I was noticing a rise in popular media critique of the Christian church, many of my personal connections started to share their stories of church work. In fact, overwork is a common reason why they left the church—whether it was managerial pressure or intrinsic desire that prompted this overwork, it was still a salient theme. While overwork can be common in many organizations, shared faith seemed to dissolve any professional boundaries and created informal, unhealthy structures. This overwork often led to friends feeling exhausted and cynical about the work they did—feelings reminiscent of burnout.

In fact, burnout has been a popular topic for study in recent years, and its connections with emotional labor (Kim & Leach, 2021; Maslach & Leiter, 2016) may also map onto spiritual exploitation and spiritual labor (McGuire, 2010; Chappell et al., 2022). Therefore, burnout's relationship with organizational identification in churches is worth exploring.

This study offers new perspectives of organizational identification in several ways. First, it connects organizational identification to a spiritual lens. As Frederick and colleagues (2017) explain, "When one derives meaning about vocation from a transcendent source, personal accomplishment is tied to a faith-based meaning-making system, creating a spiritual framework for understanding work" (p. 270). Therefore, I analyze organizational identification through this spiritual framework, which helps answer the call for researchers to look at organizational communication in nontraditional contexts (Garner, et al., 2016). Second, past research has started to make connections between burnout and identification (Bhowmick & Mulla, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). I intend to further explore their linkage by examining Kreiner and Ashforth's (2004) *over-identified worker*. Finally, understanding organizational identification and spiritual exploitation as dynamic concepts, co-created by the organization and the individual, helps create not just academic, but practical implications for this research.

This study is broken into five chapters. First, I have introduced the call to study organizational identification and burnout from a spiritual lens in my introduction. In the second chapter, I review past literature of these concepts to more fully understand their definitions and applications. My third chapter covers the methods for my proposed study—contextual information regarding participants, my framework, and analysis. The fourth chapter analyzes my findings. Finally, my fifth chapter puts these findings in conversation with the literature and conclude with this study's implications.

Literature Review

To fully analyze the over-identified worker and salient themes of burnout in religious work, I turn to explore identification, burnout, and faith-based organizations. This literature review will define organizational identification and explore its various components: inducements to identification, multiple identifications, and types of identification. Next, I will examine how burnout relates to both identification and faith-based organizations—namely, how these three concepts complicate and connect with one another. Finally, I will draw attention to the sparse literature concerning faith-based organizations and churches, in particular, and how identification can affect labor and calling. Together, these three topics will help build a foundation for examining how faith affects organizational identification in church workers.

Identification

Identification is a communicative and social process. More specifically, Cheney (1983b) describes identification as “an active process by which individuals link themselves to elements in the social scene” (p. 342). Essentially, identification is how an individual expresses their identity to an outside target. Organizational identification (OI) literature makes a distinction between identity and identification. As Pratt (1998) puts it, “whereas identity is often concerned with the question ‘Who am I?’ identification asks, ‘How do *I* come to know who I am in relation to *you*?’” (p. 171). In other words, identification concerns itself with our relation to others rather than just self. Identification is also primarily a communicative process (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987; Scott, et al., 1998). When interacting with others, we can express ourselves, define situations, challenge assumptions, produce and construct relationships, and ultimately, express our identification (Scott, et al., 1998). Moreover, identification helps us make sense of the world around us. It “represents the dynamic social process by which identities are constructed, through which they

guide us, and by which they order our world” (Scott, et al., 1998, p. 308). As established, identification is active and can change. Therefore, it is vital to explore how identification comes to be, how it affects behavior, and how individuals may communicate their identifications.

It is important to note that, while identity and identification do influence each other, they are not interchangeable. Rather, “identification is the process of emerging identity” (Scott, et al., 1998, p. 304)—it is how we manage and construct identities. More specifically, OI defines identities as sets of rules and resources available to the individual, whereas identification is the process of enacting identity and connecting ourselves to the social scene (Scott, et al., 1998). For example, someone may identify as a Christian and identify with their job. These identities help the individual structure who they are and decide how to act in their daily life. However, if their job asks them to work on a Sunday morning and they have church, they may enact their Christian identity, or express identification, by choosing to attend the church service rather than working at their job that day. While there are multiple targets for identification at play here (faith and work), some circumstances may make one identification more salient than the other (Scott & Stephens, 2009). The individual can experience identification as they link themselves to, and maintain their relationship with, their church, faith groups, and other organizational memberships (Larson & Pepper, 2003). We can now turn to the expression of identification within an organization; specifically, how OI is understood, how it can be induced, what multiple identifications look like, and how these all may relate to burnout.

Organizational Identification

OI is more than just expressing one’s identity in the workplace—it is what happens when one identifies *with* their organization. Mael and Ashforth (1992) described OI as “a perceived oneness with an organization and the experience of the organization’s successes and failures as

one's own" (p. 103). In other words, OI occurs when "an individual's beliefs about his or her organization becomes self-referential or self-defining" (Pratt, 1998, p. 172). Moreover, OI can increase the likelihood that members will stay with the organization (Edwards, 2005). Though, OI is not just a commitment to an organization, rather it takes the relationship a step further: seeing oneself as a reflection of and in relation to the organization's beliefs (Pratt, 1998). Whereas commitment to an organization sees the employee and organization as separate entities, OI insinuates a unity.

This unity develops as individuals join an organization and become part of its groups and structures (Scott, et al., 1998). Employees are "not simply passive receivers" of the organization trying to influence their identification, "but are active participants in constructing and reconstructing their identities" (Larson & Pepper, 2003, p. 532). As the individual begins to define themselves in conjunction with their organization, their identification will grow; though they are actively constructing their identities during this time, they are not immune to organizational persuasions, especially if these inducements align with their individual values and beliefs (Larson & Pepper, 2003). Moreover, this identification can help create meaning in the workplace and foster a sense of belonging (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). The individual can also identify themselves with different levels of the organization (e.g., coworkers, groups, profession), and they establish this identification through communicative interactions with others in their organization. Research has found strong links to establishing OI through discourse (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987; Scott, et al., 1998; Larson & Pepper, 2003; Brown, 2017). Through communication, identification may be constructed and reconstructed. As Larson and Pepper (2003) explain, through discourse, individuals will engage in active sensemaking as they "explain themselves and their decisions in the face of competing identity structures" (p. 529).

Through this, individuals can construct their own self-narratives within the organization and repeat organizational cultures and stories (Scott, et al., 1998; Brown, 2017). Moreover, they may feel more inclined to repeat a certain type of discourse depending on the organization they are in (e.g., ‘mirroring’ language used in Alcoholics Anonymous to promote cohesion; Chappell, et al., 2022). By reifying one’s own identity and its connection to the organization, the individual enacts those identities and situates themselves in the workplace (and thereby experiences identification).

The Impact of OI

OI has simultaneous consequences for the individual and the organization. Essentially, as OI affects the employee, it has a corresponding impact on the organization. OI has been associated with self-reported job satisfaction, turnover intention, and a sense of belonging (van Dick, et al., 2004; Davies, 2001). While this is positive for the employee, it also means that organizations have a motive to encourage identification. Moreover, OI can influence an employee’s decision making. For example, if the individual makes a decision with the “welfare of an entire organization as their primary concern, s/he likely identifies with the organization” (Cheney, 1983a, p. 346). In fact, Cheney and Tompkins (1987) argue that if the identified worker fails to make a decision for the good of the organization or a commitment to an organization, they “in a very real sense, negate the self” (p. 8). Decision-making processes can also be further complicated by adding a religious identity into the mix (McNamee, 2011), because one must account for both organizational and spiritual factors—like discerning God’s voice in processes (Endacott, et al. 2017). As Ashforth (2016) describes, identification allows the organization to take “root in the hearts and minds of those who identify with it, enabling them to enact its purposes, values, beliefs, and so on” (p. 362). While this is quite an invasive (almost grisly) way

to describe OI, it also is a clear way of showing that the organization does have incentive to induce identification so that their workers act cohesively with the organization's goals.

OI's Inducements & Sources

OI can be induced by an organization through a variety of tactics. Cheney (1983a) proposed three initial strategies to induce identification as derived from Burke (1973): the common ground technique, identification through antithesis, and the assumed or transcendent "we." Research studies since this initial proposal have confirmed that the messages members receive from their organization can influence their sense of belonging (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Rick, 2013). To further explore identification and how organizations foster belonging, this section will cover inducements to OI and sources of identification.

The first of Cheney's (1983a) inducements is the *common ground* technique; one tactic of common ground is assuming shared value. As Cheney (1983a) puts it, "in some cases, the organization states explicitly that 'we' have the same interests as 'you,' the employee" (p. 151). Also, under the common ground umbrella are tactics like testimonies, advocating benefits and activities, and recognizing individual contributions (Cheney, 1983a). Concisely, establishing common ground associates the employee with the organization: the organization tells the employee "we are similar; we are of the same substance" (Cheney, 1983a, p. 153) which aligns with OI's *oneness* definition (Mael & Ashforth. 1992).

Inducements to identification can also be more implicit. Cheney's (1983a) second proposed inducement is identification by *antithesis*, where the organization and employees unite against a common threat—essentially "an explicit dissociation from one target implies association with another" (p. 153). For example, the Christian church may use identification by antithesis, naming the enemy as *sin* or *evil*, and establishing themselves as religious members

“fighting the good fight.” Even more, during an organizational shift, the enemy may be an organization’s old identity (Chreim, 2002; Biggart, 1977).

The *assumed we* is Cheney’s (1983a) third inducement and can often be found in communication like emails, newsletters, public addresses, and more. It allows for organizations to “present similarity or commonality among organizational members as a common assumption” (Cheney, 1983a, p. 154). Provided that employees accept the assumed we as true, it induces identification. However, the more discrepancy or inequality between employees, it is likely that they are less inspired to accept commonality.

Cheney (1983a) also offers *unifying symbols* as an inducement to identification, which is understood as the significance of a name, symbol, or logo. For example, this may be a cross for Christian organizations, signifying Jesus’ death on the cross to take punishment for all sins. Unifying symbols are also supported as an inducement in the literature organizations produce for their employees. DiSanza and Bullis (1999) found that Smokey the Bear appeared to induce identification within the United States National Forest Service. They reported: “Forest Service employees expressed a visceral affection for Smokey Bear and his message of care for our natural resources, which translated into identification with the Forest Service and its many resource-related premises” (p. 375). Therefore, while language and discourse can induce identification, logos, images, mascots, and more can also become symbols of the values an organization stands for and thus an inducement to identification when seen.

Finally, it is not just the organization that can induce identification. One’s relationship with other organizational members can increase identification with an organization (Scott & Stephens, 2009). In fact, organizational colleagues or peers can be the ones inducing identification. For example, Rick (2013) found that sorority members sharing testimonials (under

the common ground strategy) gave individual members of the organization a personal voice, rather than having the inducement come from leadership. Even though these testimonies may have been organizationally sanctioned, because peers and colleagues were the ones to demonstrate the common ground strategy, it may feel more authentic to newcomers. Even more, though not an inducement from others, a sense of calling can enhance one's identification. Calling can be understood through its components "an external summons, meaning/purpose, and prosocial motivation" (Duffy & Dik, 2013, p. 429) and can therefore help individuals find meaning and satisfaction in their work both at the organizational level and a societal level (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Ultimately, there are a variety of ways in which identification can be induced: through messages from leadership, communication with peers, and even a transcendent sense of calling.

Multiple Identifications

Identification is not stable; rather, it is fluid and can fluctuate (Scott & Stephens, 2009). Additionally, identification goes beyond the organization as a target, but also looks at multiple sources of identification *within* the organization (Scott, et al., 1998). For example, an employee at a church may identify with the faith, the denomination, the church, the staff, the congregation, the profession, and so forth in addition to their own social identities. While identification solely with the organization is possible, it is likely that an employee will feel that they share similar qualities and values with various targets within said organization, hence the multiplicity in identification (Scott, et al., 1998).

Moreover, multiple identities are something to be expected. As Scott and colleagues (1998) put it, "regions of overlap should be common since an individual would nearly always experience some overlap of his or her various identities" (p. 315). Given this, organizations

cannot expect individuals to have a single “work identity” when entering the job. Instead, there are multiple identities that interact with one another and become salient at different times. According to Larson and Pepper (2003), the employee is not a passive recipient of OI; rather, they actively participate in the communicated and negotiated process of identification. For example, an employee may more strongly identify with their profession than their employer because of these multiple, negotiated identifications.

Types of Identification

Now that multiple identifications have been explored, analyzing different types of identification will be helpful for understanding how OI can be further complicated. When one thinks of identification, it usually has a positive connotation: “I identify *with* X,” or “We *are* X.” However, identification is not always a way to associate oneself with something; rather, it can be much more nuanced. Scholars recognize that there are different types of identification: *conflicted identification*, *disidentification*, *de-identification*, and *over-identification* (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). In these, we can see that individuals may have mixed feelings, and both identify and not identify with their organization (conflicted identification), identify as opposed to an organization (disidentification), not identify at all with an organization (de-identification), or completely identify with an organization (over-identification) (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). Exploring these nuances helps determine how an employee may engage with their organization.

Conflicted/Ambivalent. Conflicted identification (also referred to as ambivalent or schizo-identification; Williams & Jensen, 2016; Elsbach, 1999) occurs when “one can *simultaneously* identify and disidentify with an organization or aspects of it” (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004, p. 4). The individual is symbolically split into two—they maintain some identification while also completely separating themselves from the organization. Individuals

may choose which positive associations of the organization they identify with, while also being committed to an ideology that is “at odds” with their organization (Kriener & Ashforth, 2004, p. 4). Or, as Pratt (2000) found, “individuals may ‘fit’ at some points in times but not at others (e.g., transition from positive identification to ambivalent and then back again)” (p. 482). For example, employees could still maintain connections and identification with colleagues, but be opposed to the organization’s poor reputation.

Furthermore, an employee may have identification with their role but not their organization. As Williams and Jensen (2016) found in their research, secondary school teachers felt conflicted teaching sex education in their classrooms. Given that the mandated, abstinence-only programs did not address the full scope of sex education, participants identified feelings of inauthenticity, expressing that the goals of their profession (i.e., “teaching children to be decision makers, providing accurate information” (p. 1578)) conflicted with the curriculum their organization gave them to teach. Scholars have offered discursive strategies for managing this kind of conflicted identification (Larson & Pepper, 2003; Williams & Jensen, 2016). Some of these strategies include comparison, logic, and support. Comparison occurred when employees could analyze the benefits and problems of aligning with an identity (like comparing an old company expectation versus an updated company expectation) (Larson & Pepper, 2003). Larson and Pepper (2003) also offered logic as a tool, where people could “respond by presenting rational justifications for their identification choices” (p. 546). This strategy could assume organizational logic (what is cheapest or most effective for the company) or figurative logic (where one can understand their identity in figurative or metaphorical language). Finally, Larson and Pepper (2003) found support to be an effective strategy, as an employee could rely on others to help justify their identifications. In Larson and Pepper’s (2003) words, it is seen as “My way

of thinking is reasonable because others believe the same thing that I do” (p. 548). They found that this support can manifest directly, indirectly, or even use the assumed we (Cheney, 1983a).

Identifications also have the potential to conflict with overlapping (even, previously compatible) identifications. For example, being a Christian and being a church worker may be two identifications that often interact well in the organization, but it could be problematic if they are ever put in conflict with one another (e.g., unethical organizational practices; doctrinal beliefs interfering with roles, like if the church one works for upholds that women should not teach, but one’s personal belief is that women should be able to teach). Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) note that when there are incompatible demands within a role, the opposing forces “such as co-worker or supervisor expectations, ethical considerations, and divided loyalties...converge on the individual, creating a sense of torment or conflict” (p. 10). For example, if a church employee (OI) is asked to do something (like refraining from speaking out about church scandals) that their Christian faith (social/individual identity) considers as sinful, their identifications may be in tension. Thus, there are several opposing forces and incompatible demands causing conflicting identification. Moreover, if this conflicted identification continues to fester without being solved, it may engender disidentification (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004).

Disidentification. Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) defined disidentification as “an active separation from the organization, not just a coincidental or benign mismatch of attributes” (p. 3). As opposed to conflicted identification, where employees still do identify with some aspect of the organization, disidentification occurs when employees identify themselves as completely opposed to the organization (Pratt, 2000). Research points to events at Mars Hill Church as an example. Mars Hill was a mega-church that soon became controversial as the main pastor bullied church workers and men within the faith and was later identified as a member-abusive

organization. Employees and members leaving Mars Hill wanted more than just to exit—they wanted to identify as an “ex-member” (Garner & Peterson, 2018). This is similar to Pratt’s (2000) findings where, “distributors become ‘anti-Amway’ rather than simply severing their connection” (p. 478). Member disidentification may seem undesirable, but Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) note that it can ultimately lead to “helpful behaviors such as whistle-blowing, innovation, and conscientious dissent” (p. 3). These actions show that disidentification could bring about an ultimate good and opens the door for critical discourse.

De-identification. While disidentification poses an “anti-organization” stance, deidentification no longer associates with the organization whatsoever (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). This can arise during a member’s exit from the organization (McNamee & Gould, 2019). Planned exits (*anticipatory de-identification*) may also help employees begin to disengage from the organization, which can impact productivity and engagement and even cause discomfort (Davis & Meyers, 2012). For example, Williams and Connaughton (2012) found that, in a struggling organization, members would slowly begin to withdraw and distance themselves from their organization. Specifically, sorority members would distance themselves by not wearing their letters (a unifying symbol) or shutting their doors as to not engage with other members even before their exit.

Over-identification. Conflicted identification, disidentification, and de-identification imply a tension with or move away from the organization; conversely, over-identification completely subsumes the individual’s identity into the organization’s identity (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Cheney, 1983a). In this case, an employee puts the organization’s needs as their primary concern above their own individual needs or they adopt the organization’s values completely as their own (Cheney, 1983a). In fact, employees may not even realize this has

happened. For example, it was not until their exit from their organization that missionaries realized that their personal, spiritual, and vocational identities were enmeshed (McNamee & Gould, 2019); it was at this point that the employees faced an identity crisis. Participants said, “All the sudden, I was like, oh, what’s my relationship with God outside of [this]?” and “We just relied on our community at APGO for our identity for over a decade, you know” (p. 63-64). This aligns with Kreiner and Ashforth’s (2004) postulation that a worker could lose their individual identity if they become over-identified with their organization. Ultimately, different types of identification affect how individuals engage with their organization.

Dark Side of OI

OI is a contentious topic. Notably, contention occurs when addressing the ethical impacts of perceiving a *unity* with an organization, assessing whether OI supports multiple identifications well, and exploring if OI is a cure or catalyst to burnout. The dark side of OI is starting to become a popular topic in a variety of research, in organizational science, psychology, management studies, and communication studies. This dark side phenomenon explores “whether situations exist in which increasing an employee’s organizational identification in fact does more harm than good” (Kraus, et al., 2015, p. 487). As Cheney (1983) noted in the early years of OI research, “identifying allows people to persuade and be persuaded” (p. 342). This persuasion can create positive work environments, but it also may have the power to take advantage of identification. Additionally, Conroy and colleagues (2017) explained that threats to identity, stressful work environments, and others being unaligned “with the collective good” can lead to OI going to the dark side (p. 196); even more, they confirm that over-identification can mitigate the good OI has to offer. It is worth exploring how high OI can leave organizational members in a vulnerable position, especially knowing that organizations may try to foster OI in order to gain

more control (Pratt, 1998) and keep employees at the organization (van Dick, et al., 2004).

Burnout

Next, I will turn to burnout, which Maslach and Leiter (1997) describe as “the dislocation between what people are and what they have to do. It represents an erosion in values, dignity, spirit, and will—an erosion of the human soul” (p. 17). With burnout as a common buzzword and helpful lens for study in today’s organizational communication literature, scholars and practitioners alike are looking for a remedy to this phenomenon. Some have suggested the cure (or at least a major factor) is identification with an organization (Bhowmick & Mulla, 2020; Zhang, et al., 2022). Studies have found that if an individual feels more identified with an organization and that they are similar to their colleagues, they may seek social support which can prevent burnout (Avanzi, et al., 2012). However, the same study also found that “a strong identification may lead to a higher workload” (p. 164), which supports Kreiner and Ashforth’s (2004) postulation that an over-identified worker may be “completely consumed by work” (p. 2) (see: over-identification). Therefore, taking a critical look at burnout and identification is important for this study.

Research on burnout has created a divide in the literature between seeing it as one-dimensional (just exhaustion) or multi-dimensional (exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy) (Schaufeli, et al., 2008; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). However, I maintain the multidimensional approach for this study, echoing Schaufeli et al.’s (2008) sentiments that “reducing burnout to mere exhaustion boils down to putting new wine (burnout) in very old bottles (workplace fatigue)” (p. 212). As Maslach stated in Mills (2021), burnout is more than just exhaustion; people in the workplace can feel exhausted, “but they still like their job... they feel good about what they’re doing, they still feel good about themselves and how well they’re doing.”

Moreover, burnout was initially theorized as a stress from prosocial occupations (roles that work towards the benefit of others, towards the greater good), though it has since been extended to many types of work (Maslach, et al., 2001). Therefore, a multi-dimensional view of burnout is characterized not solely by exhaustion, but also includes cynicism and inefficacy and can be understood through an organizational lens. Exhaustion is, as Maslach and Leiter (2016) describe, “wearing out, loss of energy, depletion, debilitation, and fatigue” (p. 103). The second factor of burnout, cynicism, is defined as “negative or inappropriate attitudes towards clients, irritability, loss of idealism and withdrawal” (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p. 103). Finally, the third dimension is inefficacy, “described as reduced productivity or capability, low morale, and an inability to cope” (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p. 103).

In particular, burnout can occur when there are mismatches between the work and the individual. As Maslach and Leiter (2016) recognize, when one has an overwhelming workload, lacks control in their organization, receives insufficient recognition and reward, has poor relationships with coworkers that lack trust and support, or feels their values conflict with their job, the individual is more likely to experience burnout. In fact, emotional labor, understood as the expectation to express (or, to perform) desired emotions and responses during work (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993) regardless of whether they align with the individual’s true emotions, can catalyze burnout. A recent study of South Korean customer support workers by Kim and Leach (2021) also found that emotional labor “was positively associated with the two core systems of burnout: disengagement and exhaustion” and noted that exhaustion can be “a long-term consequence of emotional labor” (p. 509). Therefore, in addition to Maslach and Leiter’s (2016) work-individual mismatches, emotional labor may have a worthwhile connection in this study with burnout and identification.

Furthermore, multiple identifications may affect burnout. Lammers and colleagues (2013) note that studying burnout alongside multiple identifications (profession, group, and organizational) can be valuable; their study supported the idea that “work group identification protects individuals from emotional exhaustion and depersonalization” by providing outlets for anxiety and humorous responses (p. 529). Therefore, multiple identifications may have the potential to protect one from burnout. However, *conflicting* identifications may be an impetus to burnout. Again, as Maslach and Leiter (2016) theorized, if one’s moral principles conflict with one’s job, burnout may be more likely to occur. If a worker with conflicted identification feels that they are being inauthentic at work, they may experience inefficacy, or an inability to perform their role (Williams & Jensen, 2016). If clashing expectations start to cause feelings of torment (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004), a worker may be at risk of exhaustion trying to keep up with one’s roles and a lack of control. These all are examples of how multiple identifications could conflict to a point of burnout. It is worth it to explore what it looks like for OI to be a catalyst to burnout. Lastly, adding another identification—spirituality—can further complicate feelings of burnout and how an employee may negotiate identification. In my next section, I explore how faith-based organizations can affect identification and why these are particularly salient organizations for study.

Faith-based Organizational Communication

Three in every four people in the United States identify with a religious faith, and about half of Americans say that their religion is “very important” (Jones, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021). Though studies show that America is growing less religious over time, religion’s prevalence within society remains powerful (Garner, 2016), and researchers cannot ignore the linkage between such a pervasive identity and how it might reflect in one’s workplace. Modern

media also points to a growing interest in critical religious studies, especially when unregulated identification with faith or faith leaders can lead to disaster. Specifically, Cosper's (2021a) podcast reveals spiritual abuse and narcissistic leaders, Barr's (2021) book deals with contradictions in religious practices, and Du Mez (2021) addresses the toxic, hypermasculine cultures of Christianity. Such a predominant, pervasive identity must then be addressed in OI research. Thus, I will explore literature on faith-based organizations, how identification and spirituality intersect, how faith and burnout intersect, introduce spiritual labor as a connection between these concepts, and finally offer two questions for this research.

First, I turn to examine faith-based organizations (FBOs)—where religion meets the organization. FBOs are seen as a subset of nonprofits with religious roots and motivation. Specifically, Bielefeld and Cleveland (2013) recognize FBOs as prosocial organizations with some sort of religious expression. FBOs can include a broad spectrum of religious affiliation, whether overt or covert, but religion is often “central in shaping the actual motivations, rhetoric, practice and production” (King, 2011, p. 72). In fact, spirituality can change rules, thoughts, language, and action when added to an organization (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006). Thus, FBOs are unique fields of study because both secular and spiritual factors are involved in the organizations, which can greatly complicate culture, decision-making, and identity.

There is an important distinction between faith-based and secular organizational communication. In particular, Buzzanell and Harter (2006) argued that when analyzing religious communication, there is a need to move away from secular hegemony. Secular hegemony dismisses the spiritual and centers around worldviews that “privilege managerialist and consumerist ideologies and foster identity constructions that elevate one side of binary thinking to the exclusion of other ways of constructing our worlds and our field” (Buzzanell & Harter,

2006, p. 1). Rather, researchers must acknowledge that recognizing the spiritual actually *broadens* our understanding of organizational communication. In fact, ignoring the spiritual and just focusing on the cost-and-benefits of work in a capitalist system completely ignores half of Americans that say their religion is important to them, and neglects the existence of FBOs. In reality, the spiritual and the secular can often conflict with one another, which may complicate organizational processes and identity-formation within a workplace.

Particularly, some individuals are worried about being *too* secular in a faith-based organization (McNamee, 2011). FBOs must also add in a divine perspective when making decisions and cannot just focus on capitalist, secular processes (Endacott, et al., 2017). Even more, nonprofits already act as a way for individuals to “put their values into action” (Ryan-Simkins, 2021, p. 772), so adding a spiritual element—where “the mission of this institution is the mission of their faith” (Feldner, 2006, p. 77)—further complicates organizational roles.

Altogether, adding faith into an organizational context makes understanding identification more complex. As previously established, adding a faith identification can conflict with other identifications (especially when one has a sense of calling). Moreover, because one’s faith often directs their personal and moral values, burnout may be more salient if one feels that they are being asked to do work that conflicts with these principles. Ultimately, identification with faith in the organization, feeling divinely called to one’s job, and the risk of burnout are all prevalent factors to analyze in FBOs and organizational communication.

Identification

FBOs introduce a new target for identification: spirituality. Johnson and Jian (2017) recognize that how one orders their identities may be complicated: “is the individual a Lutheran, which is a Christian religion, or is the individual a Christian who practices Lutheranism?” (p.

187). This can influence how one experiences identification—is it with the denomination (Lutheran) or the religion (Christian)? Multiple identifications are also especially salient in FBOs like churches, where one’s faith can intersect with their role in the choir, in a Bible study, in mission work, and so on—each role creating more targets for identification. Because all these roles are faith-centered, they likely overlap and interact with one another. Moreover, the very language, practices, and cultures in an FBO are related to a shared faith, which can further deepen one’s religious identity. The way that shared values and inducements to identification affect one’s spirituality in the workplace are avenues to explore identification further.

Identification with a religious organization (like an FBO) can create deeper bonds than with a regular business (Pratt, 1998), and these organizations can be a place to enact a deeper sense of self. This is because FBOs align themselves with a specific vision that ultimately affects all aspects of a person’s life (“family, social, work, and spiritual lives”) and individuals may seek these types of organizations “in an attempt to feel whole” (Pratt, 1998, p. 184). FBO members have also noted that a clear mission has helped them become revitalized and develop organizational identity (Johnson & Jian, 2017), and that “motivation to achieve organizational objectives is directly linked to the mission, vision, and impact of the organization’s programs and activities” (Bassous, 2015, p. 374). Moreover, FBOs are a place where workers can enact their personal values within their workplace (Ryan-Simkins, 2021). Altogether, working at FBOs and religious organizations are not just a way to make a living; rather, they are a way for members to enact and align personal identities with professional work.

The rhetoric used to induce identification in FBOs can influence member experiences and their own spirituality. Driskill and Camp (2006) studied a faith-based group to analyze what identification strategies promoted unity. They found that prayer was an effective strategy,

because it was able to join people together (like Cheney's (1983a) assumed we strategy) and let people orally ideate what could happen if they worked together. In fact, Driskill and Camp (2006) suggested that prayer was also a helpful tool to manage tensions and affirm foundational values in the organization. However, as Yip and colleagues (2010) suggest, there is "a delicate balancing act between the binding and blinding power of faith" (p. 467). While religious language and practices like prayer may help unite a group, there is risk that it can lead to concertive control (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006) or that the rhetoric may alienate certain identities (Yip, et al., 2010).

As with most any study of communication, there is a dark side of identification in FBOs. Garner and Peterson (2018) studied an extreme case of a member-abusive church where entanglements between members' own identity and the organization's identity proved to be a complication when trying to leave the church. One example of this conflicting identification was a worker being fired after questioning leadership, while her son remained on staff; the ex-employee desired to separate from the church, but still wanted to support her son's ministry. Other experiences of abuse in this church were so severe that individuals "not only dissolved their identifications with Mars Hill [the aforementioned church] but with the greater Christian church and their own faith as well" (Garner & Peterson, 2018, p. 162). Though this is just one case study, it points out the complex nature of identification with FBOs—already an understudied concept—and therefore must be explored more. Moreover, if one feels *called* to stay at an organization but has been exploited in some way, it could further complicate their identification.

Calling

Calling can be central to one's identification with an organization. As Dik and Duffy (2009) defined, calling is a "transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation" (p. 427). Whereas OI is a *oneness* with an organization, calling can come from the individual before they step foot into a role—it is an outside call that helps one find *meaning* in a position rather than *relation* with the workplace. Calling has roots in religious traditions formed during the Protestant Reformation (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), where calling was described as work that "both pleased God and contributed to the general welfare of humankind" (p. 33). As contemporary understandings of calling became more salient, so did the move from a sacred nature to self-actualization (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). As Bunderson and Thompson (2009) found in their research on zookeepers, calling can feel like a culmination of one's natural talents, interests, and opportunities divinely leading one to their position. The researchers saw calling as a double-edged sword, with the positive side providing "identification, meaning, and importance" and the sharp edge characterizing "moral duty, personal sacrifice, and vigilance" (p. 39, 41). Therefore, despite its mystical, meaning-making definition, calling can be utilized for good, but can also be manipulated by self or others.

This notion of calling is common for nonprofit workers and especially faith-based ones, but the individual may not know how to balance their calling with work or conflate it with their entire identity. Smith (2007) describes religious nonprofit work as "a way to stretch beyond the earthly realm," reaching for values and meaning "that transcend mere human existence" (p. 273). Often, those whose work is their calling may have "particularly intense experience[s]" because their values are rooted in the work that they do (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017, p. 584). Rather,

calling within work must be balanced well with one's identity; as Schabram and Maitlis (2017) found, "those who enact their calling as an identity or as a contribution to be performed are more likely to burn out and leave," whereas those who have a balance, enacting calling as a "practice to be learned," are more likely to flourish (p. 605). Specifically, enacting calling as a practice put workers in a position of humility; they could achieve this balance by not viewing their call as saying "if I don't do it, nobody will" or seeing challenges as threats (p. 597). Rather, calling as a practice oriented workers to see roadblocks as "opportunities for mastery" and see work as a gradual process, not something that they were immediately good at (Schambram & Maitlis, 2017, p. 599). Therefore, the individual may put themselves at risk by getting so caught up in the importance and fulfillment of calling that they neglect to create personal boundaries and balance.

There is a need for boundaries and balance when it comes to calling (Molloy, et al., 2019), or else it risks becoming damaging and leaves one potentially vulnerable for exploitation. Though calling is linked with higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Neubert & Halbesleben, 2014), an organization may see this and warp calling's pure essence. For example, an organization may commodify calling, where an employee is "paid in meaning" (Molloy, et al., 2019, p. 435)—essentially, being asked to overwork themselves without compensation. If one feels called, they may sacrifice pay or comfort in order to make a difference or pursue their purpose (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Additionally, the exploitation may be done on a more psychological level, with employees feeling like they have failed their moral duty or neglected work by placing boundaries (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Whatever effect calling has on FBOs and employees, it deserves to be studied further, especially in relation to its religious roots. Burnout is a suitable avenue for further exploring this concept of overwork.

Burnout

Burnout is a risk in especially human service-oriented organizations (Maslach et al., 2001), and FBOs are no exception. Literature supports that religiosity can help with well-being, mitigate stress and burnout, and enhance resilience (Forward & Sadler, 2013). However, just because an organization is faith-based does not mean it will be immune to burnout stressors like role conflict and role ambiguity. Research shows that work-family conflicts can contribute to burnout, especially when one spills over into the other (Dunbar, et al., 2020). When personal identities like family and work are enmeshed in FBOs (McNamee, 2011), work-family conflict may have the potential to create more intense experiences of burnout. Even an imbalanced calling may be a catalyst for burnout (Molloy, et al., 2019). Additionally, Scherer and colleagues (2015) hypothesized that even if spirituality mitigates burnout, it may be exchanged instead for a “stoic perseverance,” which has its own health consequences (p. 8). Ultimately, burnout and FBOs are well-researched individually, but it is worth linking the two together to see their relationship. Once concept that may begin to highlight the experience of burnout in FBOs is spiritual labor.

Spiritual Labor

Literature on spiritual labor is still in its nascent stages, but the concept can be useful within this study as I analyze how religion impacts burnout in an organization. Spiritual labor ultimately deals with how the individual interacts with constructed meanings of spirituality in the workplace and how they may ‘mirror’ expressions of spirituality based on these meanings (McGuire, 2010; Chappell, et al., 2022). McGuire (2010) originally defined spiritual labor as “the commodification, codification, and regulation of organizational members’ spirituality” (p. 75). Though, this definition has recently been contested by Chappell and colleagues (2022), who

rather understand spiritual labor as a discursive, identity-affecting, relational process. Chappell and colleagues' (2022) new framework for spiritual labor recognizes McGuire's (2010) contributions but advances our understanding of what spiritual labor can encompass. Notably, Chappell and colleagues (2022) present a dynamic rather than a static view of spiritual labor, meaning that spiritual labor is not something that an organization can "do to" an individual, but rather is "it is produced (socially constructed) in the relational dynamics between individuals and organizations" (p. 321).

Moreover, Chappell and colleagues (2022) argue that this new conception of spiritual labor must also a) view spirituality as something formed through discourse, b) identify identification strategies to induce spiritual labor, and c) consider identity work's role in spiritual labor. Because meanings of spirituality are co-constructed, spiritual labor can be a two-way street where both employee and organization have agency. Additionally, as the authors put it, "spiritual labor is not necessarily a mode of subjugation. It is the practical accomplishment of mutual identification forged in discourses of spirituality" (Chappell, et al., 2022, p. 328). This idea of the employee as an active agent—determining what discourses to engage in, how they will accept inducements to identification, and if they change their identity based on these communicative tactics—is perhaps the most notable change from McGuire's (2010) theorization to Chappell and colleagues' (2022) new framework. Like Larson and Pepper's (2003) explanation of OI, these individuals are not passive receivers of spiritual labor; rather, they bring their holistic selves to the organization and, though they can certainly be victims to unfair power dynamics, encounter spiritual labor *relationally* rather than as an imposed commodification.

Finally, religion and spirituality both link the individual to a broader, transcendent context. Though there is a definitional difference between religion (organized, specific) and

spirituality (broad, tied to ethics and morals), I affirm that spiritual labor can encompass the experiences of religious workers in churches. McGuire (2010) affirmed that there is a need to explore spirituality in religious contexts without getting into doctrinal analysis, which is precisely what this study intends to do. Therefore, I will now introduce my guiding research questions.

Combining Identification and Faith

Faith-based identification is an intrinsic motivator for the religious person. While being employed at a church should help one's faith naturally extend to the workplace, there is potential that multiple identifications, exploitations of calling, and spiritual labor can affect an employee's identification with a church over time. Thus, it is valuable to gain both a broad and specific understanding of how these concepts relate. Therefore, I first pose the research question:

RQ1: What is the relationship between faith and organizational identification for church workers?

Though faith may help assuage burnout in an organization, there is potential that spiritual labor and exploitation may occur. To dig into these specifics, I ask the research question:

RQ2: How do faith and organizational identification relate to church worker burnout and spiritual labor?

Methods

This study qualitatively investigates how working in an FBO (specifically, a church) can affect a worker's identification. This project bridges well-studied organizational literature (i.e., OI) with understudied workplaces (i.e., FBOs) by examining the role of an individual's faith. It also addresses salient issues regarding potential spiritual exploitation and burnout in church workers, which can cause intense trauma for individuals (Cosper, 2021b; Garner & Peterson, 2018). Moreover, a secondary goal is to examine burnout and explore its relationship with a) identification, b) faith, and c) spiritual labor. These aims, along with recent interest in these topics, make this a "worthy topic" to study (Tracy, 2010). Tracy (2010) altogether offers eight criteria to produce a quality, qualitative study: "(a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence" (p. 837). These have guided my methods. In the following section, I review the overarching goal of this study, participant information, and my research procedures.

Researcher's Role

Assessing the researcher's role is a vital ethical consideration, especially for qualitative work where analyses are interpretive (Creswell, 2014) and provides *sincerity* for quality research (Tracy, 2010). When asked about my research, I often pose my positionality as someone who wants to be respectful, yet critical of their faith; to balance both appreciating Christianity and also holistically recognizing the effect it has on Christians and how they enact their faith—the good, the bad, and the in-between. Moreover, my experience as a Christian who graduated from an evangelical university but has not worked for a church aided this study, because I can *understand* the stories participants share but will have not been an *actor* in one myself. Rather, this research drew inspiration from peers and colleagues who entered church spaces and

experienced their faith in different ways after becoming a worker rather than just a member.

Overall, I am aware that this is an area for both academic and practical research and can “speak the language” to better understand participants’ experiences.

As a church member and volunteer, I understand religious language, stories, expectations, and cultures. These understandings allowed me to have more organic conversations with participants because I understand church structures, but the diversity in which churches operate and the experiences individuals have working for those churches kept me in an inquisitive posture (e.g., “I think I have an understanding of servant leadership, but can you give me an example of what that means to you?”). I also have a basic understanding of any biblical stories or tensions that participants pose because we are operating from the same text (the Christian Bible). As a church volunteer and confidant for other church workers, I understand the expectation (whether internally or externally) to work hard for the sake of promoting the Christian faith. Lastly, after attending a religious university with a diverse array of faith practices, I have gained some understanding of Christian culture across many denominations. The various sites I have been part of (i.e., religious university, churches, religious conferences) allow for a diverse array of connections to find participants for this study. Finally, I put forth my identities as a Christian, White, cis woman, raised in a religious household as factors that may inevitably influence this research.

Research Approach

This research project is a qualitative, phenomenological study of paid church workers. This approach takes careful examination of the way discourse and concepts can shape one’s experience (Tracy, 2020). Because concepts like OI and spiritual labor are examined, negotiated, and induced through discourse, phenomenology provides an effective avenue for study.

Phenomenological research is where the researcher “describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by the participants” (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). Moreover, it considers everyday experiences, which participants may even start to make sense of in the midst of interviews, especially as their experiences relate to power and ideology (Tracy, 2020). As a researcher, I also have a role in collaborating with participants to help them understand and “explore [their] subjective experiences” (Tracy, 2020, p. 66) and participants in my past research projects have described their interviews as a healing process. These rich descriptions and active meaning-making processes were helpful to explore as I examined how paid church workers portray the essence of faith’s role in OI.

This study utilized one-on-one semi-structured interviews. As Tracy (2020) notes, “Through interviews, participants can provide accounts – or rationales, explanations, and justifications for their actions and opinions” (p. 78). Semi-structured interviews allowed me to enter the conversation with a guide for how the interview would go, but also provided flexibility for organic conversation and an opportunity to co-create meanings of key terms (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013). During the interview, we discussed the participant’s role in their FBO, identification with the organization, how their faith affects this identification, what their experiences with burnout and spiritual labor are, and the relationships between these constructs.

Participants

Participants in this study needed to meet the following criteria: a) have been employed in a U.S. Protestant, Christian church and been a member of this church, b) must have been paid or compensated in some way for their work, c) had been employed in this church for at least 12 months within the past three years and left, and d) must have identified as a Christian at some point during their employment, and e) 18 years of age. In an effort to narrow down FBO research

more, I decided to specifically look at the unique tensions that lie in church workers' identities. As McNamee (2011) noted, church workers' spiritual, personal, and organizational identities can be "intrinsically enmeshed... (e.g., pastor, church member, employee)" (p. 423). This runs the risk of finding it difficult to leave organizations in a way that voluntary church membership or working in an FBO may not. Moreover, past research on churches has primarily focused solely on leadership (Garner, 2016; Kreiner, et al., 2015) and volunteer/member experiences (Garner & Peterson, 2018; Gailliard & Wong Davis, 2017; McNamee, 2011), which neglects the holistic team involved in running a church. Therefore, I included all paid members, regardless of leadership status (e.g., administrators, accountants, marketing, coordinators, ministry directors, pastors, and so forth). I specified a Protestant, Christian church to control for how participants' expressions of faith may differ compared to other, similar religions (e.g., Catholicism, Mormonism). Overall, this study intended to explore the experiences of an understudied group within an understudied organization.

It is valuable to note that Protestant denominations, while holding similar faith-based tenets, can differ in faith-based practices. If we understand Christianity as a tree, Protestant Christianity can be seen as one large branch off the main trunk (other branches may be Catholicism, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witness, and so on). From Protestantism, other related denominations of Christianity branch off (e.g., Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist, and so on). From each of these, even smaller branches of specific groups distinguish themselves (e.g., Assemblies of God, Foursquare, and so on). Sometimes these specific groups are run by one denominational board; other times, these groups are self-governing. For example, we can understand that an individual's specific church can be nested within the Assemblies of God, within the Pentecostal

denomination, within the Protestant branch, within the Christian tree. See Appendix A for further visualization.

Participants had to have been workers who were paid or compensated in some way. Meneghetti and Seel (2001) explain that there needs to be a clear distinction between a paid employee's duties and a volunteer's contributions and responsibilities, noting that ethics, values, and communication changes significantly when studying either. Additionally, this study specifically analyzed paid church workers because members of churches—though their identities can be enmeshed with the organization—are not dependent on the church for their financial stability and therefore can exit more easily. I clarify that these workers must be paid monetarily or *compensated*, because it is not unusual for church workers to be paid by unconventional means, like the church providing employee housing, which further complicates an organizational exit.

The minimum tenure a participant could have was 12 months at their organization, which ensured they had gotten the chance to understand the organizational culture. These participants must have worked there *within* the last three years to ensure that their stories were still recent and accurate, and to account for COVID-19's impact on church structures.

This study included church workers that left their organizations. COVID-19 greatly affected the nonprofit world (Kuenzi, et al., 2021) so for this specific study, member exit could be voluntary, removal from position, or organizational closure to account for pandemic struggles. Because this thesis is written in 2023, it would be remiss to not mention COVID-19's impacts on organizations and identification. Ashforth (2020) argued that identity and identification scholars must consider “how critical events and an organization's responses to them signal the organization's lived values and worth as an identification object. Nothing, after all, reveals

identity more than how an actor chooses to respond in a painful crisis” (p. 1765). Though this study does not primarily concern itself with COVID-19’s impacts on identification, I inevitably still encountered relevant pandemic experiences.

Participant Data

Altogether, I conducted 13 interviews for this study. This study revealed a relatively younger, White, homogenous population for study. Participants’ ages ranged from 22 to 43 years old ($M = 32.8$; $SD = 7.8$), revealing a younger demographic than is usually typical for church work (Zippia). Interviews ranged from 54 to 70 minutes ($M = 60.46$; $SD = 5.4$) and produced 225 pages of cleaned transcripts. 10 participants identified themselves as White (77%), 2 identified as Asian or Asian-American (15.4%) and one identified as White/Hispanic (7.6%). Altogether, participants represented 8 different denominations. Some participants noted that their church identified as a certain denomination but was not always acting out that denomination’s theology; in this way, participants would say “we were technically Assemblies of God but acted nondenominational.” Of the participants, 2 intended to continue in church work; 4 are involved in some sort of para-church ministry or religious work (e.g. missionaries, chaplains, etc.); 4 were in secular jobs; and 3 did not share. For a demographic visual, see Table 1: Participant Demographics below.

Procedures

I utilized purposeful sampling and snowball sampling (Tracy, 2020) to make sure participants fit my inclusion criteria, which resulted in 13 interviews. I reached out to potential participants and connections who I knew fit these parameters (i.e., paid church workers over 18 that have worked in a church for at least 12 months within the last three years) to start the recruitment process and then engaged in snowball sampling (see Appendix B for recruitment

Table 1:
Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Church Role	Denomination	Church Size (attending members/ compensated workers)	Tenure
Cassie	Assistant to Pastor	Southern Baptist	300/8	1 year, 6 months
Connor	Planter / Pastor	Foursquare/Pentecostal	70/1	17 years, 3 months
Deborah	Lead Pastor	Assemblies of God	43/3	17 years, 5 months
Eli	Associate Pastor	Wesleyan	60/4	1 year, 4 months
Flora	Welcome / Community	Presbyterian (Acting: Nondenominational)	400/14	1 year
Glen	Youth Associate Pastor	Assemblies of God	130/4	2 years, 2 months
Isabelle	Marketing	Assemblies of God (Acting: Nondenominational)	30,000/75	1 year
Janae	Children's Pastor	Assemblies of God	120/5	4 years
Marty	Planter / Lead Pastor	Assemblies of God	30/2	9 years, 8 months
Nehemiah	Worship / Young Adults	Presbyterian (Acting: Nondenominational)	400/14	1 year, 3 months
Rebecca	Administration / Video Editing	One Missions Society Holiness Conference	60/5	1 year
Sara	Associate Pastor	United Church of Christ	350/13	2 years, 7 months
Sean	Sole Pastor	Reformed	150/4	5 years, 8 months

email). Snowball sampling is a method where participants can suggest other potential members to participate in this study (Tracy, 2020). This type of sampling also typically retains more participants than random sampling because there are commonalities between participants and not just random outreach (Tracy, 2020). I also reached out to connections I have made by promoting my research on social media on my personal pages (see Appendix C for social media recruitment). Participants were asked to complete a Qualtrics screening survey and consent form (see Appendix D) to determine if they meet the research study's qualifications. Altogether, there were 20 confirmed responses to the screening survey; of these, 7 did not qualify. Participants were compensated with a \$20 Amazon gift certificate once they had participated in the interview.

Participants were given a choice of meeting in-person or via Zoom for their interviews. Eleven of the participants chose to meet via Zoom and two chose to meet in person. For those who chose in-person interviews, we met at a location of their choice. Because of the sensitive nature of this research, church spaces were not appropriate locations to conduct interviews. After participants granted their permission, I audio recorded the interviews either using a voice memo app that is password protected on my personal device or recorded the conversation via Zoom, which was then uploaded to a password-protected online drive. Afterwards, I used an online service to transcribe the interviews. I then listened to each interview and checked the generated transcription for errors. All participants agreed to be recorded for this study. During member checks, I did not record participants and instead took handwritten notes.

In Appendix E, I offer the interview guide and script I used to help build rapport with participants and structure each interview. To answer RQ1 (i.e., What is the relationship between faith and organizational identification for church workers?), I asked participants questions about

their relationship with their workplace, colleagues, and faith. To transition the conversation from identification to faith, I asked “When I was starting to create this study, a question I had was ‘what happens when your place of work is also your place of worship?’ – how would you describe your experience working in a *faith-based* organization?” To get at the complexity of working in a religious organization, I asked participants to differentiate faith work from secular work and then examine if any personal values had conflicted with their work role. This also helped tease out if they experience multiple identifications and how these different identifications might interact (like conflicted identification or over-identification).

To answer RQ2 (i.e., How do faith and organizational identification relate to church worker burnout and spiritual labor?), I took information from my identification questions and connected them to burnout and spiritual labor. If participants had not already started talking about burnout, I initiated the topic by posing the question: “Sometimes when people do what they love and follow their passion/calling, it can lead to burnout or overworking themselves. How does this resonate with you?” I asked for their definition of burnout and, if needed, I provided them with a definition consistent with the literature and ask questions that get at each tenet of burnout—exhaustion, inefficacy, and cynicism (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Finally, I gave participants a working definition of spiritual labor and asked if it resonated with participants. We then discussed if they had experienced this type of labor or if they had participated in the co-construction of it.

Finally, I started initially coding interviews halfway through data collection and once participants’ interviews revealed no new codes, the data reached saturation (Tracy, 2020). Moreover, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) found that smaller sample sizes (between 9 to 17

interviews) can be an adequate size to reach saturation for qualitative studies, especially in studies with homogenous populations.

Ethical Considerations

Before collecting data, I sent my research proposal to Colorado State University's (CSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB), which upholds research integrity and compliance. Moreover, because my research involves human subjects, I have been certified through CITI, an organization that offers "research, ethics, compliance, and safety training" (CITI). All planned interactions (recruitment and interviews) included scripts approved by CSU's IRB. Additionally, recordings were collected on my private devices and then immediately transferred to a password-protected online drive only accessible by the researchers. During analysis, I was mindful of how I introduced each participant and presented the demographic data to fully ensure confidentiality. In order to stay true to a participants' interview, I utilize ". ... " to indicate removing unnecessary words from a participants' transcription and "... " to indicate a pause or the participant trailing off in their thought.

Analysis

For my analysis, I primarily utilized Tracy's (2018) phronetic-iterative approach, which begins by identifying "a *problem-to-be-solved*" (p. 62). This approach let me analyze my data while also turning back to existing research and previous literature. Tracy (2018) suggests that researchers start their analysis by entering a first-cycle coding to "allow the empirical materials (rather than past theories or predetermined concepts) [to] drive the coding" (p. 65). This helps capture the basic concepts at hand and see what language emerges from the data. I kept the first cycle of codes in a codebook in a password-protected file and then revisited the codes as I engaged in the secondary cycle of coding.

For my first formal cycle of coding, I went through the data to come up with primary codes like “divine communication” to signal prayer or participants talking to God, “faking faith/phoning it in” for when participants described performing their faith, and “relational work” to highlight when participants felt like they connected interpersonally with others. Altogether, I came up with 149 unique first cycle codes.

The secondary cycle of coding required an understanding of past research and helped me more meaningfully connect the data with current literature. This method of coding ensured that I manually went through each interview multiple times to find commonalities and themes rather than immediately trying to interpret the data. To help guide this coding, I also paid attention to Owen's (1984) guide to thematic analysis. This mode of analysis highlights recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence occurs when words with similar meanings are repeated (e.g., obligation, necessity, expectation) which also helps explain how participants may give different meanings to similar concepts. Repetition is when a participant repeats “key words, phrases, or sentences” (Owen, 1984, p. 275). Finally, forcefulness can occur when a participant emphatically, dramatically, or notably talks about something; Owen (1984) says forcefulness “refers to vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pause which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances” (p. 275). While Tracy's (2020) phronetic-iterative approach and primary and secondary cycles of coding were my main analytical approach, Owen's (1984) thematic analysis helped inform *why* certain codes are especially important.

To transition from first to secondary codes, I grounded myself in the literature and wrote analytic memos to track my thoughts and explain my methodological decisions. In particular, I focused on literature concerning identification, burnout, church work, and spiritual labor. As I started to parse out my secondary codes, I engaged in tabletop coding to see how my codes could

interact and be restructured (Saldaña, 2021). I followed Saldaña's suggestion to "subsume codes into broader codes or categories as you continue coding" (p. 36) as the codes naturally got more specific between transferring them from computer to sticky notes and back to the codebook. Altogether, I condensed the 149 preliminary codes into 39 secondary codes and then grouped them into 5 categories (see Table 2 below)—*identities in tension*, *expectations*, *forced separation*, *balancing authenticity*, and *proposed solutions*.

Finally, I used member reflections after I finished interviews and analyzing my data. Member reflections (Tracy, 2010) were another meeting that I had with five participants where I created a dialogue post-interview to present my research. As Tracy (2010) explains, "member reflections are less a test of research findings as they are an opportunity for *collaboration* and reflexive *elaboration*" (p. 844). Moreover, it was a chance for me to check with participants that my research was understandable and for them to see the results of their participation. Member reflections, as suggested by Tracy (2010) are a modified version of member checks; additionally, they helped to triangulate data, both of which are techniques to enhance credibility as noted by Lincoln and Guba (1986). Engaging in member checks enhanced credibility for this study, as participants were able to reflect on what they had shared and add any additional context they felt was important. The opportunity for member reflection was extended to all participants and resulted in 5 of 13 participants reflecting on the data—Cassie, Deborah, Isabelle, Glen, and Eli. I had prompted them to expect about 5 to 30 minutes of reflection, whereas actual reflections took 8 to 52 minutes. I gave participants a general overview of the findings and then specifically read them their own quotes and how I conceptualized each. In response, some participants chose to expand on their experience and others simply confirmed that it was correct.

Table 2:
Secondary Codes & Themes

Secondary Code	Theme	Exemplar Quote
OI Enmeshment Conflicting identification Narcissistic identification Targest for identification Spiritual inducements	Identities in Tension Includes how participants experienced multiple identifications in their role or even one particularly salient identification.	“My social circle, my work circle, and my church circle—it was, if you drew a Venn diagram, it was all one circle” (Glen, Pastor)
Faith-based beliefs Expectations of role Expectations of leadership Expectations of church work Expectations of others “Always on” Transitions Leadership conflict Politics vs church Peek behind the curtain Scripture reference Lack of organization	Expectations Participants often went into roles with expectations of how they would interact in the workplace. Lived reality affected their emerging identities in the social scene and identification with the organization.	“I definitely held them to a higher standard, to a different standard. Right like I expect more out of a church, and out of a denomination, than I expect out of the local car dealership” (Marty, Pastor)
Tension in role Souls at stake Where to vent Pouring out/pouring in Forced separation	Forced Separation Participants felt pressured to separate themselves hierarchically from church members, which exacerbated burnout.	“You can’t vent about the challenges at your church to members of your own community. That’s not helpful or healthy.” (Sara, Pastor)
Overwork Traumatic work Poor mental health Faking faith Spiritual labor Emotional labor Relational role Divine communication	Balancing Authenticity Occurred when participants felt they had to balance between authenticity and performance. Includes what happened when they felt they <i>could not</i> balance the two.	“I know that it’s a tight rope. On one side of the tightrope is compassion, fatigue, and burnout. ...the other side of the tight rope is protecting myself so much that I feel like I’m being inauthentic.” (Sara, Pastor)
Transparency Authenticity Support Rest Boundaries Accountability Church vs. business	Proposed Solutions Participants offered (often faith-based) solutions for burnout and how their organizations can better support them.	“[I would have stayed] if I’d gotten more support from my superior, not just in instruction, but also in advocacy, and finding out what I needed.” (Flora, Director of Communications)

Summary

Altogether, this study meets all eight of Tracy's (2010) criteria for a quality qualitative study. It addresses a relevant topic and makes a significant contribution by bridging concepts that are well-studied (organizational identification) with under-studied groups (paid, church workers) and organizations (FBOs) during a time where the Christian church is under heavy scrutiny. The phenomenological, semi-structured interview approach provided rich data; moreover, adding member reflections added credibility and also gave participants a chance to reflexively incorporate the data findings within their own organizations. My role as a researcher addressed my own positionality (sincerity), and my training background and IRB approval added to the study's credibility. Finally, this holistic study, through my introduction, literature review, methods, findings, and analysis, aims to achieve Tracy's (2010) last criteria—meaningful coherence.

Findings

After 13 interviews, five significant themes came to light for this study. In this section, I will address key findings according to both of my research questions. Themes of *identities in tension* and *expectations* helped answer Research Question 1 (“What is the relationship between faith and organizational identification for church workers?”). Next, themes of *forced separation*, *balancing authenticity*, and *learned solutions* can help answer Research Question 2 (“How do faith and organizational identification relate to church worker burnout and spiritual labor?”). Overall, the purpose of this research is to examine how faith influences OI and how this relationship affects burnout and spiritual labor for church workers. These findings incorporate excerpts from participants’ initial interviews and feedback from their member reflections. As previous media stories (Cospers, 2021a) and research (Garner & Peterson, 2018; McNamee & Gould, 2018) has shown, faith’s influence on identification and burnout can be a particularly turbulent and intense experience that not only affects a church workers’ job, but also their trust in the church as an organization, and their relationship with their own faith as a whole.

Identities in Tension

A simple answer to RQ1 would be “faith complicates OI,” but, of course, participants’ experiences are much more nuanced. While all participants expressed OI in some way, the data suggest that faith created particularly messy enmeshments and could catalyze conflicted identification, over-identification and de-/dis-identification. Specifically, scholars understand OI to occur when an individual experiences oneness with their organization and when their beliefs about the organization become self-referential (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Pratt, 1998). OI can be induced through a variety of tactics. Therefore, I will preview spiritual inducements to

identification, how faith affects representing one's organization, and how identification was reflected in church planters.

Shared faith between participants and other Christians enhanced OI between the individual and the larger, organized Church.¹ Rebecca, an administrator for her Japanese American church, characterized this shared faith as: "I affirm that we are all united. You know one Lord, one baptism, one faith" and that, even among sister churches, it was encouraging to see "people come together and make something that was bigger than any of us." In this way, a common faith unites Christians and induces identification according to Cheney's (1983a) common ground technique. Establishing a Christian "body" creates a collective, unified identification for Christians (Gribas, 2008). Even when they did not always agree with one another on theology, participants pointed to feelings of unity and being part of something bigger than themselves when participating in organized religion. Deborah, a pastor at a small church plant, described this unity as something beautiful when she was also visiting other churches:

I just literally started bawling because I felt just this relief of like, *we believe*, and you hear everyone saying it together, and I wasn't the one having to be responsible for any of the words being said. I didn't have to make sure that everyone stood at that time. And there was just this freedom of I'm just confessing with my community that we believe in Jesus, like we believe in the Father, we believe in the Son, we believe in the Holy Spirit, you know, like. And it was just this really beautiful moment.

Thus, by repeating identification inducements like "*we believe*" rather than "*I believe*," participants felt more united to the larger Church.

¹ Stetzer & Bird (2008) explain that "The church has two expressions—the larger invisible church and the local, visible church" (p. 2). Typically, religious research uses capital-C church to refer to the former, and small-c church to refer to the latter.

Churches often used spiritual discourses in their routines and organizational culture. Repeating Bible stories, devotions, and engaging in prayer were all discursive inducements to identification. For Deborah, it meant reciting the Nicene Creed, a statement that links Protestant Christians' beliefs. Other participants, like Janae, a children's pastor, shared that they enjoyed praying before meetings because it put them on the same page as their colleagues. Janae said: "That's the first thing that you do as tradition. And not like, 'We need to do this,' but it definitely is something that shows we're in this together." Thus, these spiritual inducements could make people feel connected to a larger, shared faith, as well as their individual church.

Moreover, identification bound the individual with the organization (Ashforth, 2016). Flora, a Director of Connections (generally known as someone who manages and supports new church members and social events at church), equated identification with always *representing* her organization: "I directly reflected my church. At least, that's how I felt." Flora was first attracted to the church because of its prominent leader and was very drawn to the church's mission. As Scott and colleagues (1998) affirm, identification is more likely to occur when the individual's and organization's values align. As she stepped into a paid role, she felt more like her actions embodied the church. This sentiment was echoed by Eli, an executive pastor, who shared: "Everything you do is under the label of 'you are employed by the church.' So you need to be mindful of that." Similarly, he always represented his church, but he also was bound to the organization with every action he took. He could not act as an individual, rather he was subsumed into the collective (Ashforth, 2016).

Other participants also constituted identification as being a reflection or *emulation* (Pratt, 1998) of their church and its values. For example, Marty felt called to plant a local church and explained that the church plant also had his own likeness:

If I'm the leader, and particularly the originator, the values are going to be things that I claim on this, and belonging to the mission is to be something that I claim on this, and belonging to right, like, it is a reflection. *The church is as much a reflection of me as I am of it* [participant's emphasis]

The organization's mission, vision, and core values were also a direct reflection of Marty; he explained that he would not enforce or curate any values of the church that he did not already believe in himself. While an individual may try to fit into an organization's values (like Flora did for her church), the sole church planter², on the other hand, has the unique experience of creating the organization from scratch. Not only did Marty enter his church's groups and structures, but he also created them (Scott, et al., 1998).

Marty also reported taking the church's success and failures to heart because he was the originator of the organization: "Because I did that. That's me. That's my success. That's my skills." Marty explained his connection to the organization almost verbatim to Mael and Ashforth's (1992) definition of OI, as "the experience of the organization's successes and failures as one's own" (p. 103). While Marty recognized that this was not a healthy practice, his identification with the church—the inescapable feeling of *oneness*—made it difficult to separate his own identity from the organization. This difficult separation echoes enmeshment, which will be explored in the next section.

Enmeshment

² Stetzer and Bird (2008) define church plants as "newly organized localized gatherings of followers of Jesus Christ which identify themselves as churches, meet regularly to engage in spiritual activity, and would broadly be defined as Protestant" (p. 2). Those who plant churches are thus called *church planters* and are living out Jesus' command to evangelize and "make disciples of all nations" (Acts 1:8, ESV; Stetzer & Bird, 2008). Typically, one person is in charge of going out to a new community to create a group of Christians and minister to those in the area.

Participants' stories suggested that in religious organizations, there is a high degree of *enmeshment*, where it was difficult to separate one identity from the next. McNamee and Gould conceptualized enmeshment as identity conflation: "a problematic blending of one's personal and social identities such that they became enmeshed as one. That is, rather than upholding their spiritual, vocational, friend, family, and organizational member identities as overlapping but distinct, they became entangled and conflated" (p. 69). Whereas OI does uphold that there are multiple levels of identification, identity conflation, or enmeshment, recognizes that sometimes this separation between levels is impossible. Through a structuration lens, we can understand identity as "sets of rules and resources" available to individuals to guide who we are, whereas identification "in a structural sense represents the type of behavior produced by and producing identity" (Scott et al., 1998, p. 304). Therefore, when identity becomes conflated, identification is also affected. Once individuals experienced initial OI, it was easier to become enmeshed and no longer have separation between multiple levels of identification. To better explain this, I turn to stories shared by these ex-church workers. Participants reported feelings of enmeshment between their work, faith, family, theology, and even their citizenship.

The most salient expression of enmeshment in this study came from Glen, a youth pastor. He was a new addition to the church and had moved from out-of-state. As he acted within the role, he started to notice that he really was only interacting with those involved in the church. He explained: "my social circle, my work circle, and my church circle—it was, if you drew a Venn diagram, it was all one circle." In essence, Glen's friends, co-workers, and church relationships all risked enmeshment, as he was hardly able to spend time outside of the organizational social circle. While Glen felt identified with his co-workers and the people he served, he noted that it grew increasingly difficult to separate his work and social life. Others described similar

situations, where there was hardly any differentiation between their interpersonal, organizational, occupational, and faith-based identifications, which catalyzed enmeshment.

Enmeshment meant that participants' various identities were entangled and hard to distinguish. McNamee and Gould (2018) found that spiritual work often conflates spiritual and vocational identifications. Participants added that church work could also entangle familial identifications. There were different severities of entanglements: some were minor, just working part-time with family members, and others were more severe, finding it difficult to separate work from regular life which eventually engendered deidentification with their church. More severe entanglements often affected all aspects of one's life. For example, Flora, who worked full-time with her husband on staff, described enmeshment as challenging and pervasive:

We would go to work together, usually in the same car, interact with the same people, go home, talk about our days, or just ruminate on our days, because we already knew what happened. It would make it challenging when one of us would have a tough conversation with a co-worker. And then the other one would have to feel a sense of responsibility for your partner, but also just this is still my coworker, you know. And so, it just it got a little tricky. ...we really didn't figure out a balance. I think it was really hard to draw boundaries when it came to when we were doing ministry, and when you were just at home, especially since our home was the [Young Adult] House.

Part of the pair's compensation for their roles was housing, meaning that they did not have their own house separate from the church. Instead, it was where some of the young adults that they supervised also lived. Because Flora and her husband had co-director roles, it often made switching between the partner-coworker dynamic difficult as they lived in church housing, always in direct contact with those they worked with, creating even more entanglement.

Enmeshment can also affect church membership and is especially salient during organizational exit. Three participants who were part of churches that were in leadership transition expressed that church members often had a certain loyalty to their original pastor. For example, once a particularly influential pastor left, that pastor often took part of the church

congregation with them. Eli shared that, because of a mass exodus at his church, his church could no longer afford to keep him on staff. He said:

When the founding pastor did leave, which she said she was always going to, but just the way it went up, it all happened, was really messy. I mean, so much of a church plant can be like family and friends. And so, all those people left with her. ...the people that I serve very much identified with the founding pastor because a lot of them knew her to some capacity. ...just like everyone was Pastor [Renee]'s people.

Eli's example reveals that enmeshment can be "really messy." The pastor beforehand had planted a church that included family members, friendships, and other interpersonal relationships. When she left to go do something new, those connections decided to follow her. At this point, Eli felt the congregation had revealed they were more enmeshed in their identities as friends and family of Pastor Renee rather than having a strong identification with the church itself.

These kinds of interpersonal enmeshments also complicate how pastors and ministers enact their roles. Connor, lead pastor at a church he had planted, expressed this confusing enmeshment in his experience. He had decided to plant a church and moved across states to start the new organization. Friends and young couples from his previous church followed him and soon became like family. Connor described what the enmeshment was like:

I would have hard conversations, but this person is like my little sister, right? Or I'm like a spiritual father, or these people love my kids and they like their own, you know? So, it was tricky. I think that's why, like the hurt side of things is so profound because it's like there isn't a lot of clarity of rules, you know?

Churches are often described as families and the Christian Bible refers to other members of the faith as one's "brothers" and "sisters." Prominent apostles in Christianity also take on parental titles in Scripture. Thus, enmeshment is literally built into faith: Church workers and members alike are encouraged to see each other as family. However, for participants like Connor, seeing

others as his family complicated difficult conversations. When some of his fellow church members left the church, he described it as a “betrayal”:

It was really hard for me to disconnect like someone leaving, someone mad, someone going to different church, from it being about like me, like rejecting me. It’s hard for me to, like, just disconnect that because, like I said, I was like, ‘Oh, these are my friends and my family and my close relationships.’ And I had a close, close, close friend who bailed on us. And I used that term, like, specifically because I felt really betrayed, like by far the worst betrayal I’ve ever felt in my life, my whole life.

Connor interpreted people exiting from the church as something personal. Connor went so far as to call this *the worst* betrayal of his entire life. Thus, especially in leadership and church planting positions, enmeshment can exacerbate hurt when people fail or leave the church. Connor’s identification with the co-leaders and congregation he built the church with ended up affecting him organizationally, relationally, and personally. This example goes to show how entangled these identities (i.e., pastor-friend-family) can get.

Rebecca explained that her family identified as Christians upon immigrating to the United States. She recognized the inherent enmeshment between religion, citizenship, and race. She said:

I guess the other part is that my family became Christian because of acculturation, and because of the pressure to assimilate. ...I think that, coupled with my family, like this very intense pressure to become, my grandparents would say, to become American, I would say, to become white, and to be white is to be Christian.

For Rebecca’s family, enmeshment was advantageous for their social scene. By aligning themselves with one identity (Christian), they became enmeshed in other identities that represented a dominant group (American; white). Thus, enmeshment helped affirm citizenship. Ultimately, Rebecca, generations later, was able to recognize the different levels of identity, though, in the moment, they appeared conflated. Altogether, enmeshment complicated

interpersonal relationships and pastoral traditions; though, for one participant it became an acculturation tool.

Targets of Identification

Many participants in this study revealed that there were multiple targets for identification: the role itself, the church's mission, the congregation, their denomination, their religious branch, and, ultimately, their faith. Because there were multiple targets for identification, participants could parse out that they *did* identify with some level of the organization, but did *not* identify with others; or, they could easily tell the difference between identification with the church members versus identification with their faith versus identification with the church.

Participants attempted to articulate their own identities in relation to identification with the organization. Sometimes, there were clear distinctions between various targets. Other times, identification with an organization completely subsumed one's identity. Sean, lead pastor of a, in his words, "traditional" church, explained that he was able to engage with his faith in different ways than he connected with his church. He reported that he did yoga, read from mystics, and practiced contemplative prayer as core parts of his faith, and these were:

[...] a way for me to engage spirituality that was separate from my pastoral identity, although it did benefit my pastoral work a lot. ...That was another thing: I couldn't just like come into my church community and be like, 'Hey, these mystics, who say these crazy ass things are like really important to me.' That wasn't gonna fly. So that was another way in which my pastoral identity and my personal spirituality were kind of separate.

As Sean explicitly said, he could easily differentiate between different levels of his identity and identification. Sean's experience differed from another participant, Janae's, who reported:

My denomination is easy to feel connected to, because all my family members are in the AG [Assemblies of God]. So the denomination is just kind of part of who we are. ...and it's what I grew up in, what I live out. So, it's not just like an organization, but it's my faith, and it's ingrained in who I am.

For Janae, her denomination (Assemblies of God) is connected to how she was raised, to her family members, and her core identity. She described this denomination *as* her faith and as a deep part of who she is. While still being able to recognize the different levels of identification, her denomination and faith risked becoming enmeshed (“it’s not just like an organization, but it’s my faith, it’s ingrained in who I am”).

Flora had experienced her supervisor trying to discursively negotiate (or perhaps dictate) her targets of identification. For context, Flora and her husband were in charge of a young adults’ ministry—something Flora felt very identified with. However, as she developed her relationship with the young adults, her supervisor explicitly forbade her from identifying with other targets:

So I was being reminded: ‘[Flora], remember whose team you’re on. You’re on the higher leadership team. You’re not on the [young adult’s] team.’ And I wasn’t ever told ‘You’re not on the [young adults]’ team.’ But I was told, ‘Remember whose team you’re on, you’re on the higher leadership team.’

Flora’s story alludes to different targets of identification that participants may experience. While she was technically part of the church leadership team, the young adults’ group were people she spent more time with and related to more. For her supervisor, there should have been a clear difference between how identified Flora was to the young adults and how identified she was to church leadership. This caused an internal, role-related discrepancy for whose “team” she was on and with which group she was *most* identified. Though her supervisor tried to negotiate these targets for identification, it ended up creating more distance between Flora and her leadership team. Flora’s story is perfect segue into what happens when different levels of identification conflict with each other.

Types of Identification

It was clear from participants that, in church work, there are multiple targets for identification: their own denomination, spirituality, various groups within the church, leadership,

and so on. However, some participants reported conflicting identification once they grew more tenured in their roles. Upon exit, participants reported both de- and disidentification that came from complications with their faith.

Conflicted. About half of the participants experienced conflicted identification. After initially being drawn into a church's mission, they soon started to experience conflict between different targets for identification. In these instances, members identified with some parts of their organization and *not* others (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004).

Some participants did not want to recognize that different, overlapping targets for identification could conflict. For example, Cassie, in an administrative role in a large church, expressed that she felt very identified with her faith, her role, and her church. She had been attending the church she worked at for her entire life and had even helped start up some of its other campuses. When her mentor had been involved in a significant conflict with church leadership, Cassie was not sure how to deal with conflicting identification. Cassie felt identified with her mentor and other peer groups within the church that were involved in the conflict. However, she also felt identified to her church leadership. When the two targets for identification experienced conflict with one another, Cassie could sense an uncomfortable tension. She narrated her experience of coping with conflict:

I'm hearing this over here [from leadership], I'm like, okay, yeah, this is fine, like, I understand. But then I'm hearing stories from people that I know personally, and people that are leaving the church because of this, and I'm like 'What? Oh, my goodness like this breaks my heart.' But again, those people didn't tell me every detail. I knew a good amount, but there is someone I had I had to be like, 'Okay don't, tell me anymore, because I still have to serve here and I'm afraid they'll make it hard for me to submit to leadership.' And so it was like a wrestling of like, 'Do I continue? Do I step away?' Because, like I'm getting second hand hurt...

Even her discursive processing within the interview revealed that she was unsure how to explain the situation. While she did not want to reveal the details of what happened, she expressed that it

was difficult to get one message from leadership and another message from those she trusted about what had occurred. In her view, it would be better to remain ignorant so she would not have to wrestle with conflict like submitting to problematic leadership and risk getting “second hand hurt.” In this way, Cassie resisted facing the problem and instead tried to keep her head down. She ended up leaving the church later for unrelated reasons but expressed she was glad for the exit.

Others felt direct conflict between their role and their faith. Isabelle, in charge of marketing at a large church, originally took the job because she wanted to work in a Christian organization. She moved out to a new state to start this role, and she soon realized that she was in over her head:

[...] The beliefs of the church. I mean, I started feeling like convicted about like, ‘I’m promoting this.’ Like that was literally my job was to promote it. ...And I’m like, ‘I don’t agree with so much of what this like church stands for and believes.’ But it was my job!

Isabelle identified with the role itself and the idea of working at a Christian organization. However, the role asked her to promote theological beliefs that were not in line with her own. Though this conflicted identification created some cognitive dissonance in her work, she expressed that it actually strengthened her faith and made her dig into why she believes what she does. She quit after working in the position for a year, but she had started to apply to other positions much earlier than that. Similar to Williams and Jensen’s (2016) instructors experiencing conflicted identification between their school’s curriculum and what being a teacher meant to them, Isabelle was drawn to her work role, but felt constrained by her organization’s theology.

For other participants, the conflict did not arise from a theological mismatch. Rather, it came from expectations of one’s role. Flora soon started to realize that her role at a church was

asking her to be dishonest and to share private information about congregation members—actions she saw as not in line with her faith. Her identification as a Christian and identification with her church role were then put into conflict. She described:

There just was a growing dissonance, as time went on, between how I wanted to act and what my role was requiring me, not even what my role was requiring me to do, but just how I was expected to act as a leader in this church, and that was just kind of a personal conviction. ...I had a growing inconsistency between what it meant for me to be a Christian and what my job at the church was requiring me, was encouraging me to act.

Flora still identified with her church and its beliefs; it was the work she was doing that felt antithetical to her own faith-based convictions. Flora still attends the same church regularly and deeply identifies with the congregation members. When she finally was able to leave her position, she described it as a “freeing” moment. In these examples of conflicted identification, Cassie pushed away sensitive information; Isabelle found that there was a theological inconsistency; and Flora had to negotiate faith-based convictions with her church identification. For all three participants, conflicted identification was never fully resolved—rather, it took leaving the role for participants to escape the dissonance.

Disidentification to Deidentification. Participants also experienced their identification during organizational exit in a few different ways. In particular, when leaving an organization, it is common to experience de- or disidentification. Deidentification occurs when someone no longer feels connected to their organization, whereas disidentification happens when the member is actively opposed to the organization, wanting to be known as an “ex-member” (Garner & Peterson, 2017; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 2000). By framing this research as studying ex-church workers, it was expected that participants could experience both de- and dis-identification, as an organizational exit often produces these. Some participants did leave simply

to start other jobs, others experienced deidentification and left when the time was opportune, and a few felt anywhere from mild to extreme disidentification.

For example, after Marty left his church because of denominational conflict, he shared: “I identify as a Pentecostal. I do not identify as the Assemblies of God. ...I don’t ever intend at this point to ever go back into church ministry.” Marty certainly experienced deidentification as he no longer identifies as part of the denomination, though he does make the distinction that he identifies as part of the larger belief branch (Pentecostal) that encompasses his previous denomination (Assemblies of God). In this way, Marty maintained his faith, but no longer experienced OI to his particular denominational organization.

Others maintained an identification with the denomination but wanted to leave their specific church. Connor shared that, after a particularly toxic church experience, he wanted to create a church environment that was its antithesis:

We came from a pretty dysfunctional church that grew dysfunctional as we were there. Like, we watched it and tried to like it, maybe added to it, but also tried to change it in. ...And, so, I think there’s a lot of fear. And I think in a way, the way we planted was like contrary, trying to be like, *not that*, which is not probably good either.

While Connor’s experience is not as explicitly anti-organization as Pratt (2000) reported in their study, there is still major disidentification that occurred. Connor’s use of the term “contrary” and “not that” reveal a step past deidentification with an organization. Rather, he and his colleagues wanted to create something that was built in opposition to his past church’s dysfunctional behavior. In sum, exiting often produced a combination of de- and disidentification in participants; some participants used this exit to escape from “dysfunctional churches” and their demanding practices.

Ultimately, participants reproduced unifying inducements to identification, felt that they emulated their churches values, experienced enmeshment, and had to manage conflicts with

different targets of identification. While participants felt like they could enact their personal identities as Christians within church roles, identification with the church certainly came with challenges. I will now turn to expectations of church roles, which proved to be a ubiquitous downside to OI.

Expectations

Participants both explicitly and implicitly reported *expectations* as being part of their job. Some were clearly communicated to them by superiors or church members, and others were learned in indirect ways. As Eli put it, he was not sure what his supervisors expected of him: “Expectations were always found out after by failure.” In general, scholars understand identification to be a social process, one of “emerging identity” and where identification is “situated in contexts of interaction in the presence of other social actors” (Scott, et al., 1998, p. 304-5). As participants interacted with others in their role, their identifications started to shift based on the social situation. While participants tried to express identification with their role, they were met with dissonance from others’ expectations. In particular, participants had to cope with a) their own expectations of the role, b) outsiders expecting them to be “always on,” and c) what they expected church work to look like.

Expectations of Church Worker Roles

Individuals often use their individual identities to guide their identification; moreover, socialization with others can help foster a sense of belonging to a certain organization or role (Scott, et al., 1998). As Scott and colleagues (1998) asserted, these social processes and organizational structures can shape how an individual will act. In particular, participants explained that there were various expectations as a church worker: both the participants’ expectations of their occupation and outside expectations of how a church worker ought to act.

To begin, based on how he was socialized through his education and experience in ministry, Sean expected his role as a lead pastor to look rather traditional:

[I was] wanting to do what I saw is kind of like old fashioned classic pastoral work: preaching every Sunday, visiting people in the hospital, doing baptisms weddings and funerals, and counseling people through different kinds of crises. That's a lot of what I did.

A pastoral role often revolves around faith-based guidance of others and performing religious rituals. Pastor's roles then, are to teach the Bible's message, counsel members, and guide them through life.

Deborah echoed similar sentiments and jokingly called administrative work a “necessary evil” for pastors. Even though she identified with relational work, and it was what brought her the most happiness and belonging in pastoral ministry, the small size of her church made it necessary for her take on both desirable roles like ministry and (personally) unappealing roles like administration.

In fact, many church workers had to take on these “necessary evil” tasks for the betterment of their church. Glen reflected a similar role mismatch:

To be frank, it's sometimes hard to talk about what all I was responsible for, because a lot of times it was just asked random things at random times, and then you, you know, you're expected to go get it done.

There are several expectations at play here: Glen, based on his past experience with ministry, expected to do more relational tasks. However, coupled with being a new addition on staff and with a conviction that he ought to submit to authority, he was frequently assigned with gopher (or “go-for”) tasks, where he was “on call for whatever is needed.” The senior pastor, then, was freed up to take a ministry role whereas Glen had to pick up any organizational slack.

Those in more administrative roles originally—Cassie, Flora, and Isabelle—all explained that they would be sent to do tasks they were not originally assigned. When asked what her

duties were, Cassie responded: “My duties changed about every other month, only because—well, didn’t *change*—but they were *added*. There were things that were added on, as staff would come and go” [emphasis added]. It seemed that in smaller churches, pastors had to take on all roles; in medium-sized churches, lower-ranking pastors had to pick up slack; and, as churches got bigger, administrators began to fill in gaps as staff came and went. While this may be typical for any organization, adding faith to OI heightened the stakes of church work and incidentally made it harder for participants to report these discrepancies. Even more, one’s identity as a Christian made participants more willing to take on sacrificial roles or created an internal pressure to get the work done. As Cassie reflected: “My main reason for working in a church is for God’s glory and for Him. And it’s very much my personality to say, ‘No it’s okay, I’ll do it, I’ll get it done.’” Here, Cassie’s expectations came from her own identity as Christian. As Garner and Peterson (2018) explained, “identification with the church will then reshape the individual’s understanding of their own faith values and their enactment of their own identity” (p. 147). Therefore, expectations came from one’s own perceptions of how faith ought to be enacted and how their organization has changed their expectations of church work.

Next, it was not just those working in the church that had expectations, rather participants often had to understand what church *members* expected from them. For example, when Glen tried to create boundaries (like saying “no” when asked to host an event), he was met with dissent from church members. It seemed that boundaries violated church member’s expectations of church work and those that perform that work. He relayed: “When you, say, try to set a boundary and say no to something, your spiritual life is put into question. Like, ‘Well, don’t, you love serving Jesus?’ Like you know, people will either say or imply that.” Church members expected that those in church roles did not do the work for its compensation; rather, they did it

because their love for Jesus surpassed anything else. In this sense, they used expectations as a method of religious guilt.

Participants like Connor even had trouble figuring out what they expected of *themselves* as church leaders. Connor said:

I think I've always been a little too loose about it at times. I don't know. Like, did Jesus say you can't get drunk sometimes? You know, it's like, what does it actually say? You know, what do these words actually mean, instead of like, boom, black and white. Right. And I think I became... that's not a great example. But, you know, but like I became, and I still to this day, like lost in gray. 'Does Scripture say that?' I was trying to do that."

For Connor, there was a dissonance between his expectations of how he should act and biblical guidance. He describes this murkiness as "lost in gray" of what Scripture ordains or does not ordain. It seemed like there were subjective interpretations of how leaders ought to act. Even when Connor tried to act authentically, and loyal to his own personality, church members still expressed dissent.

Similarly, Deborah questioned how pastors ought to act:

Well, what is a pastor? Do pastors cuss?...Do pastors have bad days? Do pastors get depression? You know? And depending on your theological, you know, perspective and your understanding of human nature and stuff. Some people don't think that pastors can have bad days. ...these conversations around, you know, the expectations other people have on what it looks like to be a pastor, and what it looks like to have a pastor's family...

Deborah attributed this confusion to theological perspectives. As Connor alluded, the Bible is not always black and white or completely easy to understand. Even if pastors get to do the relational work they feel called to in the church, there is not always agreement that they are performing their role well.

Altogether, there were several expectations of what a church worker (especially a pastor) ought to do. There ended up being a disconnect for church workers who did not get to do the

work they identified so much with in the beginning. Or, they were overburdened in their role and no longer had the *capacity* to do what was expected of them. Conflicts between expectations and actual duties created tension for participants in their identification with the organization and their ministry role.

Even more, gender plays a role in expectations for church leaders. Often in Protestant Christian circles, “female pastor” can seem like an oxymoron. For many denominations, women are not allowed to preach (Barr, 2021; Barth 2010). However, this study included several women in authority at their churches. Participants Deborah, Janae, and Sarah were all female pastors in their churches and all shared experiences of these gendered expectations.

These imposed expectations often came from people outside of the church. Sara said that she never experienced any church member resisting her as a leader (in fact, her senior pastor was also female). However, outside sources would occasionally respond negatively. She described this explicit resistance: “I’ve not personally experienced a lot of push back from that. Aside from maybe someone, like the public work I’ve done, people on Facebook comments, sections, or something saying women can’t be pastors.” She also expressed that being a hospital chaplain seemed to be a “great reckoner, you know, [for] gender and faith.” As in, people in crisis just want someone praying and ministering for them regardless of gender identification. While being a female pastor did not impede her work, it was still a strange expectation she sometimes encountered.

Like Sara, Deborah experienced some unique expectations of what a pastor ought to look like because of her gender. Though those attending her church welcomed and affirmed her, other outside ministry roles, like missionaries, would implicitly communicate that they did not believe

a woman should have a pastoral role. When prompted to share about a time when various identities conflicted, Deborah, responded:

I mean it's silly, but it's true, because I'm a woman. We would have like missionaries who want to itinerate or district people who wanted things and they would contact [male church worker] and [he] was like, 'I'm not the lead pastor. Here's [Deborah's] email. Here's her cell phone number. You should contact her,' and he'd be like, 'Hey, so-and-so is going to contact you about whatever,' and they never would.

This proved to be more implicit resistance than the explicit feedback Sara got. Deborah went on to describe more specific instances of this, what she called “lots of microaggressions,” like women pastors being paid less because their husbands were expected to still support them or, how despite being overqualified, she had friends who applied for pastoral jobs and “were told ‘Well, if you weren't a woman, we would consider you.’” Ultimately, whether from online commentators, missionaries, or even those hiring within churches, there were still expectations that these women had to face as female pastors.

“Always On”

One ubiquitous expectation from churches was the “always on” phenomenon, which could catalyze burnout, increase overwork, and cross the work boundaries of time and space. Specifically, those experiencing OI will feel a “oneness” and sense of belonging with their organization. However, for participants, it seemed this oneness happened whether they were at work or not. In essence, they were “always on,” or always part of their organization, even when they were not technically on duty. Sara, an associate pastor, articulated this phenomenon:

One of the things I liked about being in a church versus we'll call it 'specialized ministry in an institutional setting,' was the flexibility, because I had young kids, in terms of not set hours that you have to be somewhere. At the same time, you almost never turn it off then. Like, if somebody texts you or calls you at 8 p.m., it's sort of like, with something they need to talk about, like you're on. You're always on.

Thus, participants experienced a strange dichotomy of increased flexibility in their roles, while also always being on-call. Sara gave an example of responding to texts at 8 p.m., other participants—like Glen and Nehemiah—explained that their co-workers or supervisors would send them messages about their work on days off, at 11 p.m. the night before services, or during breaks. As Sara explained, “you almost never turn it off.” Participants were on-call at all hours. Even when Isabelle, who worked in marketing for her church, was taking bereavement leave, she received calls from her supervisor:

I’m literally going to my grandmother’s [funeral] service and like, literally as I’m walking into the church, like, I’m getting phone calls from them [supervisor]... It was very offensive, honestly. I’m like, literally in bereavement and stuff. And then I’m like, literally I’m walking into the church right now, and you, like, will not leave me alone.

Isabelle described this encounter as *offensive*, explaining that she had expected more sympathy from a Christian organization. While she felt dedicated to her job and identified with its faith-based values, her supervisor’s expectations for her to be “always on” began to engender deidentification. Her personal faith created higher expectations for her church, which led Faith to take the intrusion more personally.

The “always on” phenomenon made some participants immediately want to exit their organization, and for others, it started to cause burnout. Marty shared his understanding of this expectation:

Church workers never get to take the hat off. ...I know priests who literally, I understand this so much to the point that, like if they’re going to a baseball game with people in their congregation, they’re wearing their collar. It should say that they are on duty.

Akin to Flora’s sentiment that she “directly reflected her church,” this “always on” phenomenon meant that participants were *always* a reflection of their church, whether or not they had a uniform or priest collar on. Their job description may not express that they must always be on call. Rather, it was an innate expectation of their role.

Expectations of Church Work

Most participants told stories of church work not meeting their expectations. While their roles were something they could enact individually, church work was part of a bigger picture, of a larger institution. Participants shared stories where they had the chance to see what church work was like “behind the scenes.” Some detailed experiences where leadership was corrupt, and many offered a “right way” to act as Christians working in the church.

Participants illuminated an interesting tension between knowing that churches were not perfect while still holding them up to a certain expectation or standard. Some characterized this as a “behind the scenes look” or “peek behind the curtain.” Sara articulated:

Working at a church is a unique kind of difficult. Especially if it's a church that you have loved from afar, that sometimes peeking behind the curtain is a hard process of seeing, you know, that churches are run by people flawed people just like anywhere else.

By characterizing the discrepancy as seeing something behind a curtain or behind the scenes, participants suggested that there was something hidden in backstage church work—something that is not always desirable. In fact, as noted earlier, Cassie tried to prevent herself from seeing behind the curtain, and experiencing conflicted identification, by ignoring competing stories that painted her leadership in a poor light.

Connor expressed a similar sentiment, explaining that his reasoning for not wanting to return to church work was: “I think there's a hesitancy, just like, I don't want to know the church drama.” He later described not knowing about the behind-the-scenes drama as “blissful ignorance.” Essentially, it was easier to spiritually connect and be part of the organization when he did not peek behind the curtain. Connor shared a story of his past church, which was particularly volatile or “dysfunctional,” still doing good work in people’s lives, which created some dissonance:

It was super toxic, and the guy was a narcissist and there was lots of crazy stuff happening, but people were just like, 'This is so cool and this is so great.' ...At the same time, in the midst of all that, we were like coming to Jesus and like, this will get healed. It was like, pretty cool stuff. Yeah. And so it was like, so weird. It was like a really strange experience, you know? But I think there is like, kind of this blissfulness of like, 'Oh, I just come and see what's happening on stage and the people are friendly and then I go home,' or maybe I go to a class and my class is great, but I don't know that before the class we had a staff meeting where we got yelled at for 2 hours. You know what I'm saying?

To be sure, there is a difference between unmet expectations and experiencing aggressive leadership. However, Connor's story can be comparable to Cosper's (2021a) Mars Hill narrative—both had turbulent leadership struggles, while at the same time, people were coming into their faith and being healed. It created a strange cognitive dissonance to know that so much good could come out of a toxic organization. It seemed that Connor, along with other participants, experienced more burnout and opposition to paid work within a church because of the behind-the-scenes drama.

However, not all participants experienced such toxic systems. In fact, most participants sympathized with the idea that the church is full of imperfect humans, but there was still a certain standard that these imperfect humans needed to live up to. Marty explained: "I expect more out of a church, and out of a denomination, than I expect out of the local car dealership." Sean echoed this sentiment and clarified:

I believe the church is a human institution. And so, it's gonna have, like things that are as bad as any other human institution. So, I'm kind of a realist in that regard. But I do think it is held to a higher standard, if you take its claims seriously, if you take its own claims seriously.

For Sean, there is a belief that people will fall short, and that should be expected, but it is also okay to hold churches to a higher standard. Expecting more but also allowing churches to fail does not need to be mutually exclusive.

Expectations of Leadership. The stories that upset participants the most were those they shared about their direct supervisors not meeting their faith-based expectations. Often, these unmet convictions gave rise to deidentification. In particular, participants shared stories of leadership avoiding important conflicts, sharing others' confidential information, and even asking workers to be dishonest. Ultimately, these internal struggles made practicing religion in church difficult, because of the "peek behind the curtain" Sara alluded to.

Two participants highlighted specific instances where they felt leadership was avoiding conflict or disloyal to them. For example, when Marty was in conflict with church leadership, the church attempted to turn to the district, denominational leaders about the issue. He explained, "The district, as always, was one of those types of leadership groups in which they want to go the path of least resistance." Marty described them as avoiding the conflict until someone "made a big stink" about what was going on. Marty also explained that he had gone to his denomination's schools, had worked for them, and planted churches for them, so when they did not have his back during this intra-church conflict, he felt betrayed and insulted. He deemed his exit from the church after this as "traumatic, but it was not a hard decision. Y'know, *bye*." Ultimately, higher leadership avoiding conflict until it erupted and then handling the issue poorly led Marty to leave.

Moreover, two participants reported that their main pastors would share church members' confidential information during staff meetings. Nehemiah equated this oversharing to unethical gossip:

I just did not like the way she [Executive Pastor] talked about the people in the church. ... They kind of knew people's stuff, you know. It just felt like gossip so much, and I just hated it so much. ... This doesn't seem like it's working, it just doesn't seem ethical.

Not only was gossiping antithetical to Christian values, but it seemed *unethical* to Nehemiah.

Flora echoed this sentiment about oversharing others' personal information and acknowledged:

"I just increasingly distrusted my leadership." Through these un-Christian acts, participants began to feel more distant.

Finally, participants reported accounts of dishonesty from their leadership. For Eli, lying looked like not living out one's role as a pastor. He explained:

So, it just felt so like a lie in a lot of ways for some of that time to be saying one thing and be preaching one thing. Preaching a love of God: 'Hey, you guys need to love each other. Love your neighbor,' and like none of it's happening on staff.

Eli's story aligned with expectations of church work that if leaders preached a higher standard, they should also adhere to that standard. However, because most church members did not have the same "peek behind the curtain" that Eli and other paid workers did, they did not realize that pastors were lying.

Flora saw a more explicit lie start to happen in her church. When she, along with a few other employees and the main pastor, had to fire another worker, the interaction did not end well:

My head of staff kind of took the reins, and gave her [terminated employee] a different reason for why we were firing her than what we had previously discussed, and the reason that she gave her was that we didn't think it was a good fit for her, that we felt like she was called to do ministry elsewhere, and this ministry was just taking away from what she was being called to do. ...Myself, my husband, and the other ministry director, we all talked about it after the fact, just felt extremely uncomfortable, because we all knew we were lying through our teeth because we knew that that wasn't the reason. And when we talked about it after the fact, my head of staff said, 'Well, we always want to err on the side of grace. We want to err on, you know, like encouraging people rather than putting them down.' ...From my perspective, it just seemed like an avoidance of conflict. And just not being honest, it was dishonest, and myself and my colleagues didn't feel much power to actually contribute to that discussion in a way that conflicted with what she was saying. And so we, because we remember we're being told, 'You're on the higher leadership team. We all want to be on the same page.'

Flora repeated several more times that this felt like a dishonest act and something antithetical to her identity as a Christian. Because this action came from leadership, Flora also started to feel less connected to her church role and grew to increasingly distrust her leadership. Though her head of staff tried to frame firing an employee in a more positive light (erring “on the side of grace”), to Flora, it felt like lying.

Not all leadership was so extensively dishonest and unjust. Sara described these challenging, but not corrupt, leaders as “complicated personalities.” However, even complicated personalities catalyzed the tension and conflict participants felt within their own church roles.

A “Right Way” to Act. After addressing leadership and church failings, participants began to offer “right ways” to enact church roles. This served as a tool for them to hypothetically right what had been wronged and what had led them to de- or disidentification with their organization. Often, shared, Christian values induced OI initially, so when those values were ignored or enacted poorly, participants began to withdraw. Many participants experienced this disconnect between faith and their church, particularly when they saw leadership acting out or advocating for unbiblical work. Over half of participants explicitly articulated this.

Participants used faith-based language to describe how their church had not enacted Christian values. Janae was upset about the performative nature of church work and claimed, “They cared a lot about what they looked like, which was obviously not scriptural.” Deborah directly called out hypocrisy by saying, “I don’t think that people in the kingdom should act like people who are not a part of the kingdom.” Cassie detailed actions from fellow church workers: “They were using the values, the staff values... Like justification for the way things were done. ... It was done unbiblically, quite honestly.” Essentially, there was something sufficiently wrong with what was happening at a church for participants to make a distinction that it was no longer

holy or faith-based work. Many times, it was when their churches started to act more like a secular business—caring about performance and appearances while avoiding conflict—rather than a holy institution. Isabelle described this most concisely: “They didn’t know when to act like a church and when to act like a business.” As participants perceived their organizations aligning less and less with the values they espoused, participants began to both deidentify and, concurrently, burn out. This sets the stage to answer RQ2, to see how faith and organizational identification relate to burnout and spiritual labor.

Sources for Burnout: Forced Separation

Faith complicated identification for church workers, inducing enmeshment and an “always on” expectation, that intensified feelings of burnout. This led to tensions and pressures within one’s role, mental health deterioration, cognitive dissonance amid unmet expectations, and, ultimately, traumatic spiritual experiences. To fully address RQ2 (*How do faith and organizational identification relate to church worker burnout and spiritual labor?*), I organized my findings to assess sources for burnout, how burnout occurred, and solutions that participants offered to ameliorate burnout. A major source of burnout was forced separation, where church workers had to simultaneously manage being part of and apart from their congregation. They were active members and engaged with church attendees. However, they could not divulge issues they had with the church or their personal problems to church members. Altogether, participants both in administrative and pastoral roles expressed that they often had difficulty sharing their problems with friends, gave significantly more than they received, and had a strange, spiritual dissonance that made them feel that church members’ souls were at stake if they did not perform their roles well.

Where to Vent

Participants described varying degrees of forced separation in their role between who was considered leadership and who was part of the congregation. Sometimes, the separation was explicit, like Flora's previous example of her supervisor demanding her to be on the leadership's team rather than the young adults'. Other types of separation were more implicit and self-imposed.

Multiple participants described freely expressing themselves to the congregation as harmful. As Sara put it: "You can't vent about the challenges at your church to members of your own community. That's not helpful or healthy." Here, Sara made the distinction that venting to others is not just an arbitrary rule. Rather, it is not healthy to turn to members of the same community with problems. Sara instead suggested looking for connections and friendships with other pastors and clergy members, who may understand the struggles and also be appropriately distanced from it. Marty shared Sara's struggles: "One of the pastors said, 'You can't bleed all over the people you're called to serve.' ... You can't be fully yourself with the people that you're serving. There is a separation by the nature of the work and the responsibilities." As Marty suggested, there does need to be a separation; in this way, pastors can be authentic with their congregation members to a certain point.

Moreover, if one's church experiences were particularly harmful, they did not want to affect other members' views of the organization. As Flora shared:

I didn't feel comfortable talking to my friends who also went to the church about why I was stressed at work because I was representing the church. And I would never want to misrepresent someone's place of worship, or even deter them from their place of worship.

Not only was it unhealthy for church workers to share all their struggles, but if there were internal issues, it could deter other members from feeling connected to their church. This sentiment echoes Flora's reflection that she always represented her church, for better or worse.

However, church workers not being able to turn to close friends about issues started to affect the support and care they received, which could exacerbate their feelings of burnout.

As participants grew increasingly frustrated or upset with their church's practices, they had no one to turn to. Social support has been shown to ameliorate burnout for individuals (Avanzi, et al., 2012). Hypothetically, individuals with high identification should also be more likely to seek support (Avanzi, et al., 2012), however when church workers were forced explicitly by leadership or implicitly by their own convictions to keep a level of separation, they were then deprived of support.

Pouring Out & Pouring In

Along with not being able to vent, participants also explained that they often gave a lot of themselves to the congregation. For example, Sara expressed:

Sometimes, it feels like to be a pastor is a constant pouring out into other people, and it's not always clear where the refill comes from. ...And you know, there's Biblical imagery of 'your cup runneth over,' and then to be a pastor, you are giving from that overflow, from the running over, not dipping into a well where there is limited resources. And so you have to figure out how to keep your cup full. But nobody really has the greatest guidance on how you keep your cup full.

The image of a cup running over is also reminiscent of popular Bible stories, where Jesus fed 5,000 people with only five loaves of bread and two fish. In this story, the food kept multiplying so that it could sustain everyone that was there to listen to Jesus teach. However, church workers recognized that their human capacity for care was finite, and they could not compare themselves to a divine figure. Participants used this cup pouring out metaphor to conceptualize burnout and the difficulty of not getting poured into.

Without being poured into, participants experienced exhaustion and an inability to fulfill their role. Janae explicitly acknowledged that a lack of support or spiritual care could lead to burnout: "If you, if you don't have anything pouring in, you can't keep pouring out forever. I

guess I would define burnout as working until you have nothing left to give, because you're not allowing anything else to pour in.” Janae specifically said that church work could lead to burnout when an individual pours out and does not *allow* anything else to pour in. However, what gets poured into a person may look different for a church worker versus a church attendee. As Sara described, it is “not healthy” for church workers to ask for spiritual help from their congregation, whereas it is acceptable for the church attendee to come to church and seek support. Glen mentioned that it was difficult to receive spiritual teachings from his church, noting that: “Some of the things that made me most feel most connect to my faith was having a place where I could engage as a follower of Jesus, but not in my ministry position.” Therefore, he had to seek out another source to fill his proverbial cup.

Participants shared in the struggle that it was often difficult to receive *pouring in* from problematic leadership and colleagues. Sara confirmed Glen’s point and noted that it would be hard to receive (get that *pouring in*) from her church, especially if she was in conflict with other workers. Specifically, she said:

When you have awkward moments with your colleagues, it's not like you're gonna sit there and let them minister to you. ...Particularly if you're talking about your colleagues, that you're just ticked off at about the last meeting, like that makes it really hard to experience it in the same way.

Interpersonal struggles between individual church workers could impact the support participants were able to receive. Though it might be helpful to have a church worker “minister to you,” the spiritual support was ineffective when it came from tense or agitated organizational relationships. Therefore, while participants often poured out and supported their congregation, they rarely were adequately poured into.

Souls at Stake

While it was difficult to find support, perhaps the most harrowing experiences participants shared were that their faith made interactions with church members *salvific*. In essence, working (especially in a ministry role) at a church created an internal responsibility for congregants' lives and eternal salvation. Sean dubbed this an issue where "souls are at stake." Deborah most clearly articulated this eternal intensity:

It feels even a little bit more like life-or-death because we're talking about, right, when I'm talking as a pastor. ...It's their salvation, right? So, it's like this is like their eternal life, death. And so, if I mess up, or I don't show up in a certain way, am I affecting something forever?

Part of Christian faith is the belief in eternal life, in heaven and hell. Not only did Deborah recognize that her words affected congregants' general life, but her actions affected their *eternal* ("forever") life. This dichotomy internalizes the problematic idea that pastor's language and interactions with others have such high stakes that they could send a congregant to hell forever.

Nearly half of participants expressed that they were worried their actions could have salvific implications. Marty even admitted that this train of thought, "turns you into a functional savior. Right? Like you begin to try to replace Jesus in their lives." Essentially, it was no longer Jesus that had the power to grant salvation; instead church workers took on that divine role. These assumptions were not just internalized by pastors. Rather, members of the church agreed that a pastor's actions directly reflected the congregation. For example, Rebecca revealed that she had some reservations as a church member about a pastor at one point and joked: "This pastor was like bringing people to hell, and he's taking us all with him." While this was just a humorous aside during the interview, it revealed deeper, seemingly eternal, struggles for church workers. Even those who were not in pastoral roles still felt this spiritual tension. Flora's role concerned events and welcoming people to the church, and she still felt her own influence: "I imagine in a secular job, I wouldn't feel that same responsibility, because I don't feel like

someone's faith, or their relationship with faith, is hanging on my personal struggles or frustrations with an organization." In this sense, her inability to turn to anyone else with her struggles was because of a salvific notion. The idea that souls were at stake also affected her ability to vent to others. She assumed that any poor picture she painted of the church could affect someone's faith.

Even more, small mistakes worried participants. Nehemiah, a worship leader, expressed:

When your place of work is also your place of worship, what happens if you just goofed? Dude, that wrecked me. ...These issues become almost like salvific in your head. ...At least they did for me, because you're doing it for God so like, why would you do a bad job? Which my theology doesn't make sense there. But like, that's just how it felt.

Not only did participants like Nehemiah report that the issues were salvific, but they characterized their job as "reporting to" or "doing it for" God. While worrying about congregation members' faith, the high stakes of church workers' jobs started to take a toll on their own personal religion.

Such high pressure and tension wore on participants, leading to intense burnout. As Marty explained:

I literally remember a pastor that I worked for once say, 'I would rather burn out than burn up.' As in, as the pastor, it was better for me to burn out than for myself to go to hell, or for other people in my church to go to hell because I didn't work enough.

Hegemonic scripts like this were repeated and modeled to participants: that they needed to work hard so that the people in their church would not go to hell (as Marty's pastor would put it, burn out in church rather than burn up in hell). While participants were able to recognize that their personal theology did not always align with this script, the cost of people leaving the church, leaving their faith, and ending up with eternal consequences was often too great for participants to bear. Thus, such tension resulted in particularly traumatic burnout.

The Tightrope: Burnout, Inauthenticity, and the Fallout

Burnout is characterized as exhaustion, inefficacy, and cynicism (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Nearly all participants reported being burnt out at the end of their tenure. The tensions of church work were often what initiated burnout, namely an inability to share problems with friends, consistently pouring out into others with no refill, and the pressure of souls being at stake. Sara described this strain as a tightrope:

I think I've been in this game long enough that I know that it's a tightrope. On one side of the tightrope is compassion fatigue, and burnout where and my, in order to protect myself, I can't perform. I can't do it anymore, like that's one side of the tight rope. The other side of the tight rope is protecting myself so much that I feel like I'm being inauthentic and not truly connecting with people. And right in the middle is this place where I have to walk, and I fall off all the time, on one side or the other, and it's a constant sort of game of trying to keep myself on that on that center tightrope.

This tightrope metaphor is a helpful way to picture church work as a balance of authenticity. On one side, being too available and sacrificial led to burnout and compassion fatigue. On the other side, spiritual work became a performance and lacked genuine connection. Therefore, in this section I will explore each side of the tightrope and what “falling off” can look like by examining the emotional and spiritual labor church workers put in, the balancing act, what performance and inauthenticity looks like, and how overwork and traumatic work can lead to a church worker's downfall.

Side 1: Compassion Fatigue

It is no secret that working at a church is a highly relational job. In fact, the relational aspect is what draws many church workers to come into the role in the first place. As Deborah said, “I'm really passionate about people,” so that shows up in most any work she does, especially church work. However, this kind of relational position may result in compassion fatigue (Joinson, 1992) which is theoretically understood to be a feeling that arises from the

stress of helping (or wanting to help) those suffering. Sabo (2011) compares this to a therapeutic relationship, requiring high levels of empathy that may eventually result in fatigue.

Sara expanded on this idea of a care-based ministry:

I felt like I was in a job, particularly during the pandemic, where my primary role was to take care of people, and then I'd get off work, and I'd come home where my primary job is to take care of people, because I'm a mom, and in many ways, the primary parent and organizer of our house.

She points out an interesting tension here. Not only do many pastors have congregation members to care for, but they have families to care for just as well. Sara also phrased this as comparable care, noting that the care that pastors give their families is similar to the care they show to their congregation (reminiscent of the family rhetoric that is common in religious work; Baab, 2008). Moreover, participants like Eli, Nehemiah, and Flora described coming home from work drained and experiencing difficulties connecting with their at-home families.

As Marty shared: “You’ve got to show up physically and show up emotionally every time you're around your church people. And so yeah, man, that wears on you.” Echoing the “always on” phenomenon, Marty shared that showing up as a church worker is hard because many church workers have to do it *all the time*. Moreover, as described by the “pouring out” metaphor, church workers only have limited resources to give others. When they pour out so much without being poured into, it can result in burnout.

Side 2: Inauthenticity & Performance

Inauthenticity took on several forms for participants: not being completely honest with their congregations, putting on an individual performance, trying to make services a performance, and even commodifying the congregation. Twelve out of 13 participants reported either being part of or seeing some kind of performance and inauthenticity happen in their churches.

For example, Janae described her entire staff putting on a certain face to perform for the congregation and critiqued this action. There had been an argument between the youth pastor and the secretary during a staff meeting that left the secretary in tears. Afterwards, they both acted like nothing had happened. Janae explained:

I've definitely seen the 'I need to act like I'm on good terms with everyone.' Like that argument that happened in the staff meeting, and no one talked about it. No one outside of that staff meeting knew anything about it. Even though the youth pastor and the secretary were very angry with each other, they pretended in front of everyone... No one could guess that they were actually very angry with each other and hadn't resolved anything.

In retrospect, Janae acknowledged that she wished she would have called them out on this performance. While she has tried not to put up a façade, she recognized that it is common: "I've definitely seen people, you know, pretend that everything is good just because it's a spiritual environment. ...We're about to start service, so let's pretend everything is good." It seemed that there was an internal expectation, among both church workers and even church members, that they had to maintain a certain face during church services.

Similarly, Eli had seen his two main pastors fight and put up a façade in front of the congregation, appraising interactions like this as a "disservice to your role." Eli asserted that it would be better to be authentic and look more human to the congregation instead of lifting church workers up on a pedestal. Specifically, he explained, "the congregation would benefit from seeing a pastor hurt and open rather than fake it and never know what was going on in their life." In this way, he critiqued the facework that church workers do and encouraged more authenticity.

For others, performance seemed to be a big part of the church's values. Five participants explicitly reported seeing this. Glen even said of his lead pastor's actions: "It seemed like his main goal when preaching on Sundays was to get the little ladies in the back to sing Amen and

have an emotional experience.” Essentially, Glen explained that the goal of Sundays was to get people to have the spiritual experience they came to church for, regardless of what biblical truth was actually preached.

Many participants shared that churches were not authentic in how they acted, instead they were performative. Isabelle described her megachurch to be hyper-focused on how they looked:

From my perspective, I think that their core values were just numbers and to have like a big production on Sunday mornings and for everything to run smoothly. ...Outwards, I think everything looks like amazing for people. Like, ‘Oh, like they love Jesus. They just want to, you know, bring people into the church and, you know, connect them and whatever.’ But like on the opposite side, like to me, it was just like all about like the performance of everything.

Isabelle explained that during the beginning of COVID, her church was able to edit every detail on the video that went out on Sunday morning to church members. When they returned in person, that desire for every moment to be perfect was still there. She mentioned that everyone up on stage even had scripts for every part of the service. In her view, Sunday mornings were not about God; they were about creating a flawless production.

Finally, Sean’s experience with inauthenticity was a like a covert mission assigned by supervisors. He described:

I felt an immense amount of spiritual pressure from my coach and the oversight people to commodify the people I met into like spiritual tasks, like every person to be in the community, has to feed into your planting work in some way. And I hated that.

Akin to McGuire’s (2010) conceptualization of spiritual labor, Sean felt that he had to utilize individual’s potential for spirituality and bring them into his church. This act felt antithetical to Sean’s own beliefs and began to engender burnout. Sean left church ministry soon after his coach began to communicate this message.

Overall, when church workers looked at their congregation like people to pretend in front of, people to sell spirituality to for donations (as Glen noted: “obviously, when people leave,

tithe goes down and people afraid we're going to go broke”), or people to become a spiritual task, they felt a tension and inauthenticity in their work. While not all experiences were as extreme as Sean’s, nearly all participants reported seeing others or needing themselves to put on a performance. They felt there was a dissonance in their role when they had to act inauthentically, but they also felt pressured to do so.

The Balancing Act

Participants did not always fall off the tightrope. Sometimes, there was a middle ground or balancing act they had to maneuver. When asked if he felt like he engaged in emotional or spiritual labor, Eli referenced this interesting in-between:

My wife says, ‘Like you do, you put on your pastor energy, which is like very outgoing.’ ...I wouldn’t say it’s fake. It’s just like an intentional, outward energy, and I’m drained afterwards. I’m tired, because it’s not natural for me.

This “pastor energy” or faithful face was echoed by other pastors like Sean and Deborah, who did not feel like it was always natural for them to interpersonally, positively engage with others. The faithful face was an interesting combination of wanting to appear authentic to church members but also needing a certain level of reservation. Eli expressed in his member reflection that it is not necessarily a *good or bad* persona, but something neutral.

Managing one’s authenticity seemed like it was a combination of emotional work and emotional labor. Church work is often inherently emotional work, where workers minister to their congregation and can share in joys and sorrows together with a certain level of authenticity. However, church workers often found a need to put on a certain face (“an intentional, outward energy”) to keep up with congregations’ expectations of them (akin to having to engage in emotional labor and meet expectations). Some did refer to this as “faking faith” or “phoning it in.” Cassie expressed that she could play the part of a church worker because she had been raised

in a religious culture, where religious rhetoric was “first nature” to her. Whereas other workers like Eli and Deborah tried to remain as authentic in their work as they could.

However, Sean did not always feel like expectations of a pastor lined up with his own personality. He recalled putting on the faithful face by saying, “I had a way of being in public as a pastor” where he would laugh at jokes, be happy, and be more invested in what others were saying. This was not inauthentic; Sean referred to faithful face as “a version of myself.” However, it did not feel like his *true* self, “but it was just like I don’t want to be that person.” When Sean realized this, he also decided that he did not want to return to church work after leaving. Therefore, balancing authenticity was something that he *could* do, but not something he *wanted* to do.

Balancing authenticity was something that participants had to grow over time and in the right environments. Sara explained that “there is an obligation that I feel to take time when I need it... [it’s] the right thing to do, because I don’t want to be fake in any way as a pastor.” Sara was worried she would have to “fake faith” if she became too tired and burnt out from church work. To be authentic, then, required church workers to rest so they would not need to be inauthentic with their congregation. Just as *balancing* requires practice before it can become second nature, the *faithful face* may require inner work before participants can use it completely.

The Fallout

For Sara’s tightrope metaphor, it seemed like the two options for falling off were to be inauthentic or to burn out. However, participants expressed that, after enough time, they had to stop the balancing act entirely. They pointed to overwork and traumatic work as their breaking points.

Overwork. Burnout for these ex-church workers was often exacerbated by feelings of overwork. While constantly working can surely be a catalyst to burnout, overwork seemed to be built into the culture of these churches and was not an individual choice. Participants described overwork as “drowning,” being “consumed,” “all output,” and “festering.” Nehemiah even commented that being on his boss’s good side was dependent on how much (over)work he put in.

Nehemiah continued to say that he confronted his boss about organizational loopholes for overwork. For example, he was offered a job that, when salaried, work weeks would look like 60 hours rather than 40 hours, with no opportunity for overtime. However, this was something he had to “fish out of them.” He reported: They confirmed that. You know they’re like, ‘Yeah, that’s just what it takes to uphold the mission and vision.’” This rhetoric made it seem like all churches *must* engage in overwork if they are to live out their missions completely. Other participants also encountered sacrificial justification for overwork. Isabelle had several similar encounters with her supervisor:

So, I brought it [overwork] up to my boss, and I was just basically like, ‘It’s crazy that they think that like we can do all of this.’ And I was like, ‘This is not our job.’ And, and she basically was just like, ‘Well, sometimes you have to make sacrifices.’

This sacrifice rhetoric echoes commandments to serve in the Bible, that Christians must lay down their lives to follow Jesus. However, there appeared to be a difference between freely volunteering one’s time for the sake of religion verses being spiritually exploited to do this overwork. When Isabelle confronted her boss again about expecting her to work on weekends without overtime compensation, she was met with a similar answer: “Her response was basically like, ‘Yeah, sometimes we just have to, you know, deal with it and, you know, do the work. And we’re not given the luxury of like basically enjoying our weekends.’” Isabelle explained that this

felt like an affront to a church's values and was another reason that she ended up leaving the organization.

The "always on" phenomenon addressed in the identification section thus manifested into frequent overwork for participants. Although church work seemed like it could provide flexibility, it often resulted in organizational loopholes to create extra work without compensation. Even when participants addressed this issue with their supervisors, they were met with faith-based rhetoric and called to sacrifice their own time to uphold the organization's mission.

It is valuable to note that not all participants had supervisors that forced them to overwork. Cassie explained that her leadership would frequently tell her to stop working when she went over hours. While this was positive communication, she still felt like tasks were left unfinished, and she had to balance an internal struggle of, "Is what I'm doing right now my job or am I volunteering?" Essentially, the boundaries were blurred between sacrificing her personal time to volunteer and doing the work she was hired to do.

Rebecca did not experience feelings of overwork at all, but she did take an alternative approach to logging hours. She explained that she would only put a few hours of work on her timecard, even when she was consistently working more. Her supervisor addressed this (he "did try and look out for me") and told her to log all hours she worked. Rebecca responded: "Because I had a team of video editors who are all volunteers, I felt as though I couldn't claim my video editing hours because it was the same work that other volunteers were doing." While Rebecca seemed to be in the opposite situation that other participants were in, with her boss encouraging her to work within reasonable boundaries and log her hours, the underlying expectations for work remained the same: Christians are inclined, and called, to sacrificial work (Romans 12:1,

ESV). Perhaps because Rebecca functioned in a more volunteer-based position, it was easier for her to deny herself compensation. Nehemiah and Isabelle were expected to have the same sacrificial attitude concerning work that compensated their livelihood. Nehemiah even later expressed that he would love to volunteer in church work again, and Isabelle has taken on multiple volunteer roles in her new church today. However, when overwork was an expected, faith-based norm in a full-time position, it increased feelings of burnout.

Traumatic Work. Many described their experiences working for a church as “traumatic.” This trauma resulted in failed relationships, declining mental health, and even personal faith crisis. When work was enmeshed with religion, it could be difficult to leave the position without it harming one’s personal faith.

For example, three participants recalled feeling angry at the churches, three recounted feelings of depression and anxiety, three explained that they had to go to some sort of counseling after working at churches, and one specifically pointed to physical repercussions of burnout. Participants also explained that the work they did was, at times, “disappointing,” “painful,” “crumbled my mind,” “traumatic,” and “the least happy of the work I’ve done.”

Burnout was not just a mental state for participants. It could manifest physiologically manifest, as Nehemiah described:

For me, it was like when you start to feel physical repercussions for how hard you’re going. ...If I’m taking years off my life like because of this, because of my health, and not giving myself food, like just because I was too busy.

Nehemiah’s physical repercussions led to heart palpitations and hospital visits until eventually a psychologist explained that his job was the source of his stress. Physical and mental consequences were the results of severe exhaustion to a point where he was unable to healthily

continue work. He also reported consistently comparing his ministry and work to more successful leaders and feeling discouraged because he could not live up to similar standards.

Eli also sought professional help after working in his church. He explained that, in the beginning: “I was like, ‘I need counseling.’ I’m mad. I’m angry. I come home, and I’m exhausted. I have such a short fuse all the time.” This anger came from dealing with bosses that were particularly complicated personalities and having to play peacemaker most of the time. He explained that the leaders in the church were hurting each other and hurting him. Moreover, it felt disingenuous to call church a safe place when, for the staff, it was a painful place. Eli noted that Christian counseling helped him after working at the church: “It was very helpful to process the closing of the church I was at before, to process the emotions and anger that I was feeling at this moment and discontentment, and then to put things in perspective.” He also explained that he had never worked in such an unhealthy position like that before and had to ask multiple times to be put in Christian counseling to process such traumatic work. Furthermore, three participants—all pastors at some point—explained that they never would like to return to paid church work again and that this work has impacted the way they practice their faith in some way, whether that be no longer attending church or not keeping up with routine spiritual practices.

Solutions

Amidst the wear and tear of church work, participants did experience goodness, and they offered solutions to some of the pressures they faced. Although many described leaving their role in the church as “freeing,” they still had hope that ministry work could be more than what they experienced. Participants expressed that their church needed to act more church-like, offer more support and places for rest and respected boundaries, and find ways to keep people accountable

in their roles, thus offering healthier church models. While some of these were direct suggestions by participants, many of these needs were learned by being hurt by poor practices.

Church Versus Business

Church structures were often unclear, disorganized, and comprised of conflicting values. As Isabelle commented, her church “didn’t know when to act like a church and when to act like a business.” This proved to be the case for many participants. Some participants critiqued the Western, American church and its desire to look more secular, focus on money, and put celebrity pastors up on pedestals. Often, FBO and church work toe a murky line between running their organization according to spiritual, biblical standards and running it according to business standards (McNamee, 2011). Nehemiah had a particularly salient articulation of the difference, and many of his critiques aligned with the original impetus for this paper. He said:

I believe the church is supposed to function more like a family and less like a business. Super simple. You can go listen to *Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. You can go read whatever book, and you're just going to get the same thing. ...There's a reason why CEOs are so successful, and it's because there's product. And there's a market, and there's consumers and there's profit and loss. We have none of that. ...They're supposed to make disciples of all nations, like that's not a product. We're not selling something. It's a free gift. Literally. So, I just say, yeah, less like a business, more like a family.

Familial rhetoric, as mentioned earlier, can be problematic and risk enmeshment in churches. However, business rhetoric is not always helpful either. There seems to be another tightrope to walk—on one side is familial enmeshment and the other side is the corporate colonization (Deetz, 1992) of churches. Moreover, framing what church offers as a “free gift” rather than a product to sell helps reorient churches’ missions to something they partner with God to *give* rather than curate spiritual experiences as commodities.

There was still a need for churches to keep business practices in mind, especially when it came to funding. Glen pointed out an important issue in church work: “Obviously, when people

leave, tithe goes down and people are afraid we're going to go broke." Churches are often primarily funded by the congregation, so while there is no product to sell, there still may be pressure to make sure people stay at the church. Therefore, there was often a push and pull between spiritually trusting God would provide and the church trying to act in a way that would make members want to donate more money.

Janae did not take the same issue with making sure people stayed at the church. She referenced God as a divine actor, as one who will provide for churches if it is in His divine plan. Janae explained: "If we believe that, and we believe that this is what God wants us to do, then He's going to make sure that it does work out." Faith, then, appeared to be a solution to some of the church versus business problems. Janae acknowledged that this may be an overly simplistic answer, but "God is always true to His names. He is the provider, Jehovah Jireh" (*Jehovah Jireh* translates from Hebrew to 'the Lord will provide'). There does seem to be a balance between functioning as an organization and also having faith that the church will prosper.

Altogether, participants had multiple perspectives for how a church ought to run. Though participants did not have many direct suggestions to solve the issue of churches acting like business rather than spiritual organizations, they pointed out that it was a pervasive issue that needed to change. Acting as a business often catalyzed feelings of inauthenticity, which in turn exacerbated burnout. What participants needed to prevent burnout was support.

Support

Not surprisingly, participants reported a desire to be supported in their roles. After being overworked and pouring out so often, support seemed to be the most natural remedy to the tensions participants faced. They characterized support in several ways, including empathy, transparency, and authenticity from leadership and members of the church alike.

When prompted with the question “Was there anything your church could have done to help you stay?”, Flora responded: “[I would have stayed] if I’d gotten more support from my superior, not just in instruction, but also in advocacy and finding out what I needed.” Support could therefore come directly from supervisors and coworkers and even a simple check-in seemed to go a long way for Flora.

Support could also look like having a better organized church. Glen described his church as, “Not the best organized. ...No one knows what’s happening.” Eli echoed this, explaining, “I came on staff, and I was like ‘What do I do?’ and no one had a clear answer for me.” Both Glen and Eli expressed several times that their church was not organized well, which exacerbated burnout.

Even more, support could look like being authentic and making space for authenticity from leaders. For example, Sean, a Hispanic pastor to a primarily white congregation, tried to share his family’s experiences of being racially profiled by a police officer. When he tried to incorporate the experience in a sermon, “That made people very, very angry.” Though he was trying to be authentic and share his story about race, he was met with an upset congregation, which he described as “painful.” On the flip side, Deborah said she felt most supported from her congregation when she was authentic about her mental health struggles, and they accepted her immediately. Eli suggested that churches should also be authentic about their struggles and imperfections. He explained, “There’s an opportunity there” to take pastors off of pedestals and to see them as regular humans. However, pastors did not always feel supported in their attempts to be authentic. Thus, not only do church workers need to be authentic, but their congregation must also make space for this authenticity and support their pastors in such an endeavor.

Rest and Boundaries

Additionally, participants expressed a resounding desire for rest and boundaries. Often, it seemed burnout could be ameliorated by having reasonable breaks. In fact, this lack of rest seemed unbiblical and antithetical to many participants' beliefs. Sabbath (a day without work), as they noted, was a tenet of their faith.

Some churches did try and make sure their employees rested. For example, Cassie's supervisor would not let her work over hours; however, she always felt like work was left undone. Others had boundaries frequently crossed with the "always on" phenomenon and were contacted at all hours about church-related tasks. Glen said he even tried to set boundaries, but they were not respected:

There was also just burnout, because I felt like, to a degree, I wasn't allowed to have a life outside of it [church]. Even when I tried to set it boundaries to have a life outside of it, I couldn't.

As he shared earlier, Glen was met with religious guilt from congregation members—"Well, don't you love Jesus?"—when he did try to set a boundary. Moreover, because *his* boundaries were being crossed, Glen tried to make sure that he was not crossing others' boundaries. He attempted to model better behavior and often had to do a lot of proactive work to keep the church running. Thus, better boundaries and rest could also potentially lead to better church organization.

Marty agreed that churches and denominations should put in the work to have more effective rest for their workers. He noted that even when there were pastors' retreats, the energy-restoring events tended to be more draining. When a pastor had to give up one of their free weekends to attend an event hours away, schedule someone to preach for them that Sunday, and be "preached at" multiple times over the weekend, he questioned, "What kind of rest is that actually?" and explained, "Nothing about that retreat was restful." Therefore, participants not

only expressed *just* a need for rest and for boundaries, but also a need for *effective* and *restoring* practices for pastors and staff alike.

Accountability

Many participants were frustrated with the systems in churches that led to poor leadership without accountability. While there may be teams of people to whom pastors had to report, or denominational boards to help regulate ecclesial issues, it seemed rare for leaders to accept culpability or be governed. As Nehemiah explained:

This person was on the Leadership Council, which is our innuendo for an elder board. And they were the executive, which was over HR. HR wasn't even really a thing, because that HR Person was also the accountant and also the director of operations. So, it's like everyone's holding multiple things. There's no systems for accountability. This person had their hands in literally everything.

The way Nehemiah's church was set up prevented accountability. This lack of solid structure appears common for churches. In their nascent stages, churches are usually only able to fund one role: their pastor. Pastors then must take on multiple roles to keep the church functioning, and they are often referred to as the primary authority figure. Therefore, it is not surprising that the main pastor at Nehemiah's church "had their hands in literally everything," and this made it difficult to find a way to hold them accountable.

When Eli tried to hold his pastors accountable, he realized that he was trying to talk to people who had planted a church. He recognized the work they put in, but also expressed frustration when they would not listen to new ideas. He said: "That founding pastor probably put their heart and soul into like the identity of the church. ...It's all fine and dandy until you disagree with what they believe." When Eli tried to bring in new ideas, he was either shot down or the pastor would take the suggestion as a personal affront. Eli explained that it was not just big

things, but even little things were hard to change because the leader had so much say in how the church was run.

Other participants also agreed that it was hard to keep someone accountable when they were so deeply part of the organization. As Sara shared:

That is another tricky element of when you have somebody who's been a senior leader for that long, and a faith community is—who holds them accountable when they have a seniority and more time and more history, knowledge of the Church than anybody else there?

As such, being at a church for so long made it hard to correct older pastors. Overall, it seemed that many participants needed systems of accountability—not solely for calling out toxic practices, but just in general to function as a better, more collaborative church.

Healthier Models

Finally, participants wrestled with various challenging experiences but often still had love for those they worked with and hope that there was something more. In fact, after reflection, participants often expressed a desire for healthier models in the church because they believed in all the good that a church *could* be.

Participants were hopeful that, while their time in the church was hurtful, the work could be better. Flora articulated this:

One of the reasons I quit is because I feel this conviction of ‘it can’t all be this way,’ like there has to be something better. That's healthier. And this can't just be the standard for me for what church leadership looks like.

Essentially, she left to protect herself and to protect her views of the church. Cassie described that working in places that created such spiritual and cognitive dissonance “hurt my soul.” Exit, then, proved to be a self-preservation tactic *and* a sign that participants had some optimistic view of what church could be. Even when Connor was hurt by his previous church, he still left to plant a new church, built from the hope that there could be something better.

After reflecting on the idea of souls at stake, Deborah recognized how unhealthy this mindset is. Instead, she shared that she would rather pastors and church workers see their own ministry as a partnership between themselves and God. By seeing it as a partnership, these church workers would not need to put pressure on themselves to show up correctly. Instead, “God’s gonna do what He’s gonna do,” despite how humans show up. Shifting perspectives like this could also help reconcile when bad churches do bad things, yet, people are still being saved and coming to faith. She further explained, “A lot of times when we’re reading Scripture, we put ourselves in the position of Jesus and not in the crowd.” By taking a posture of humility as a church worker, Deborah expressed hope that those in ministry would learn from the Bible’s teachings instead of just feeling responsible for them. She explained that this position would take some of the narcissism out of the church and help remedy poor experiences. By fully choosing to recognize God as an *actor* who will do good things, church work pressures can be relieved.

Summary

Altogether, the findings from this study reveal five salient themes: *identities in tension when negotiating identification, expectations of church work, forced separation as a source of burnout, the tightrope metaphor of balancing authenticity, and proposed solutions*. While these findings parse out the differences between each theme, it is valuable to note that they were frequently interrelated. Faith complicated individuals’ identification and, when expectations were unmet, it led to burnout within the organization. Moreover, working at a church created an inherent tension of needing to be close and authentic with the congregation, yet church workers also had to maintain a level of separation.

Discussion

Overall, this study sought to explore how faith impacts identification and burnout. In an attempt to uncover the experiences of church workers and potentially problematic ways of organizing, I found that, simply put, faith greatly complicates church workers' jobs. Faith intensifies OI, blurring the lines between work and practicing religion and often creating an enmeshment between the two. Faith acts as a set of expectations: what workers expect their job to look like, how leadership assumes they will act, and what congregation members believe church work ought to be. Faith allows for a "peek behind the curtain" that, for some participants, ruined their relationship with their church. Faith discourses created unmanageable work expectations through sacrificial rhetoric. All of these catalyzed burnout, overwork, and traumatic work. Though participants offered solutions to fix what had been broken for them, they often had to learn these fixes through heartbreak and conflicted identifications. While *faith* itself is not to blame for these practices, faith became a justification used to produce destructive organizational discourses and practices in churches for these participants.

Ultimately, I offer five important theoretical implications in this study. I problematize enmeshment and offer new conceptualizations of over-identification in church work, theorize the concept of a faithful face, offer further contributions to spiritual labor, and propose suggestions for faith-based organization research. I then discuss practical implications for this study, address limitations, and conclude with future directions. My discussion of enmeshment and over-identification help to illuminate the relationship between faith and identification (RQ1). Notably, enmeshment, over-identification, and spiritual labor all correlate to increased burnout in church workers, which helps answer RQ2. The concept of a "faithful face" also incidentally emerged from this study as a way participants tried to balance tensions in church work.

Theoretical Implications

The Dark Side of Enmeshment

This study builds upon McNamee and Gould's (2019) conceptualization of enmeshment (identity conflation), originally coined to discuss temporary, religious roles and organizational exit. Rather than seeing different targets for identification as distinct, the targets became "entangled and conflated" (p. 69). Dechawatanapaisal (2018) found that, for nurses, if they were more identified with and more enmeshed in their roles, they were less likely to consider leaving. Essentially, if workers have high OI, good resources, and quality leader-member exchanges, they felt more embedded and enmeshed with their jobs (Dechawantanapaisal, 2018). This thesis research further problematizes enmeshment for church workers and reveals the dangers it can hold, such as complicating church planting, organizational transitions, and preventing support.

Participants were able to locate sources of enmeshment throughout their tenure and gave specific examples of each. Notably, this enmeshment occurred through organizational discourse and relationships within their church. Sometimes this enmeshment was explicitly encouraged, but other times, enmeshment was the most natural way to interact with others in their organization. I will now explore discursive and relational enmeshment as it appeared in this study.

Discursive Enmeshment. For this study, *discursive enmeshment* is characterized by rhetoric and discourse within organizations that encourages individuals to conflate sources of identification. This type of enmeshment led to cognitive dissonance for church workers. They were encouraged to see one another as family yet had a difficult time venting to one another and felt spiritually responsible for church members. It is worthwhile to address the religious rhetoric

that led to enmeshment—in particular, the pervasiveness of sacrificial language and familial rhetoric.

Participants turned to the Bible for spiritual reasoning, sensemaking, and examples throughout their interviews. A text like the Bible can be an inducement for identification as it links common values and creates common ground for organizational (church) members (Cheney, 1983). Moreover, the Bible is a source for Christian knowledge, so it is often central to Christian identity. Thus, it is worth noting that the Christian Bible calls believers to be a “living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1, ESV), and Jesus calls His disciples to a similar sacrifice: “Let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34, ESV). As for familial language, Jesus refers to His disciples as His “mothers and brothers” (Matthew 12:49, ESV), and the apostle Paul encourages people to “Love one another with brotherly affection” (Romans 12:10, ESV). Even more, when one becomes a Christian, they enter the “household of God” (Ephesians 2:19, ESV). Therefore, when participants were told by their faith source that they should sacrifice and see one another as family, it deepened enmeshment more.

Backed by biblical language, many participants reported leadership saying that they needed to sacrifice their personal time because “that’s just what it takes to uphold the [church’s] mission” (as noted by Nehemiah’s supervisor). These leaders positioned sacrifice as a necessity of church work. Moreover, tying sacrifice to the church’s mission presented a false dichotomy that if workers did not sacrifice, the church would not be able to do its faith-imbued job (that is, “saving souls”). Recall Isabelle’s supervisor relaying that employees in church work needed to make sacrifices. These discourses and identifications eventually subsumed individuals into experiencing enmeshment—to be a Christian was to sacrifice, and so to work for a church was to sacrifice.

Many participants also experienced familial discourses that induced relational enmeshment. Workers were encouraged to see one another as family from both organizational discourse and biblical text. Therefore, it was easier to view fellow church members as *family* members. Recall Sarah's example of relational work, where she equated the care she gave to her congregation as care also given to her family. Concurrently, it became easier to sacrifice for one's (church) family. As Long and Mills relay, workplace-as-family metaphors create cultures that "prospectively govern individual behaviour and limit sensemaking and agency such that a desired social reality is constructed" (p. 333). This supports Kirby's (2006) postulation that appropriating family roles blurs the boundaries between work and personal life and, moreover, can be a form of control used in organizations. When the individual brings their personal life into their professional life, they may be "less likely to question the dominant ideology" and thus overwork themselves for the sake of the spiritual mission (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006). Though participants may feel like they are helping their family, they are really *enmeshing* the personal and professional and sacrificing themselves. While individual workers may actually perceive this enmeshment as positive (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006), research cannot ignore the harm that this type of control can do.

Altogether, participants shared stories of concertive control. Barker (1993) defined concertive control as something that "grows out of a substantial consensus about values, high-level coordination, and a degree of self-management by members or workers in an organization" (p. 408). As Barker (1993) found, organizations develop systems of concertive control around common values, work norms, and what is considered "good work." Concertive control occurred in these churches when members would pressure church workers ("Don't you love serving Jesus?"), when members would refer to one another in familial terms (as Nehemiah said, "church

is supposed to function more like a family”), and even as participants critiqued their organization for poor work (Eli criticized his leaders: “a disservice to your role as a pastor.”). Additionally, these systems can create further organizational embeddedness for workers as they use spiritual inducements to justify their expectations. Thus, these spiritual critiques can perpetrate unhealthy expectations for the organization borne out of faith. Goodier and Eisenberg (2006) add that particular discourses of *spirituality* can guide individual’s actions and perpetuate concertive control, which this study supports. By enacting discourses of spirituality, any individual can call out practices they deem unspiritual; thus, supervisors do not need to be the ones calling out workers. Rather, the members, workers, and leadership may critique and control one another under the justification of religion. This study revealed an innate tension in faith-based discourse—it was a helpful way for workers to connect with their congregation and do their Christian duty but could also induce enmeshment and control. Similar to Goodier and Eisenberg’s (2006) study about spiritually organizing workplaces, this research seeks to critically analyze faith-based discourse in churches. The data from this study suggest that sacrificial and familial rhetoric, though biblical, has potential to become a form of concertive control in churches. By enmeshing work expectations with biblical sources, participants could no longer tell the difference between their job as a church worker and their individual call as a Christian.

Relational Enmeshment. Enmeshment could also occur relationally, when participants developed relationships with others that could conflict based on their different roles. For example, those who planted churches took on a pastoral role while cultivating a community. Friends and family would naturally join the church as it grew. Those who were not already related *became* family. This supports Varadman and colleagues’s (2018) research that religious organizations often are characterized by familial (or, relational) enmeshment. Relational

enmeshment, then, was easy to fall into but could have traumatic consequences where participants did not just lose their peers during organizational exit, they lost their friends and family.

Moreover, because of the totalistic nature of churches for church workers, combining all parts of one's life seemed to be the most natural occurrence if boundaries were not put in place. As mentioned earlier, Glen had relocated to be a part of his church; compounded with overwork and lack of personal boundaries, he explained "my social circle, my work circle, and my church circle—it was, if you drew a Venn diagram, it was all one circle." Glen's experience goes to show that it can be easy in churches to entangle one's various social, vocational, and spiritual relationships. He expressed that this meant there was never a separation between his personal life and job, which increased exhaustion and burnout.

While relational enmeshment appears to naturally occur, it can harbor acute repercussions like preventing support and intensifying organizational exit. Individuals who considered church members their friends, but also people they served, had a harder time venting their frustrations and seeking support for church-related problems. There was an inner conflict between wanting a friend to lend an ear, but not wanting a church member to hear about leadership issues in fear of risking their faith. Additionally, when church planters had friends who worked in the church leave it exacerbated emotional responses. In the church planters' eyes, others leaving not only felt like a desertion of the church, but a desertion of their interpersonal relationship. Moreover, leaving the religious organization could threaten one's individual identity altogether (McNamee & Gould, 2018; Garner & Peterson, 2019). Ultimately, relational enmeshment proved to be easy to slip into but complicated to control when organizational problems occurred.

Finally, at times enmeshment could be advantageous for individuals with marginalized identities. When Rebecca's family immigrated to the United States and became Christian, they were trying also to "become American," and, as Rebecca claimed, "to be American is to be white." Here, identity conflation was a tool to present oneself as part of a dominant culture. As Orbe (1997) describes in co-cultural theory, assimilation occurs when a nondominant identity erases differences to fit in with a dominant group. In this way, they also lose their distinctive cultural characteristics in order to fit in. For Rebecca's family, enmeshment as assimilation was a strategy they used to link themselves to a dominant social scene.

Altogether, this study problematizes enmeshment in church work. Faith may affect the discourse used to induce enmeshment. FBOs, like churches, are a site where this phenomenon is more likely to transpire. Overall, the data shows that enmeshment exists within most of a church workers' tenure, from being socialized into a church to an eventual exit. This research supports McNamee's (2011) finding that church workers may have a work and faith enmeshment. This research also supports understanding churches as totalistic organizations which affect every realm of one's life (McNamee & Gould, 2019; Garner & Peterson, 2018). As Garner and Peterson (2018) described, churches can be seen as "totalistic organizations [that] are built on common values and common peer groups. Disengaging from the organization is more complicated because such disengagement can mean a severing of friendship or familial ties and of spiritual values" (p. 165). Ultimately, this study contributes to identification research by complicating enmeshment in organizations. The rhetoric and relationships common in churches and FBOs exemplify concertive control and destructive enmeshment. Though spiritual discourse may attempt to unite church workers and members, it can end up tearing down organizational relationships. Therefore, those studying identification in totalistic organizations like churches

should be especially wary of ways enmeshment may occur. Moreover, while pastors may be considered leadership at a church and have the ability to change how it functions, many participants were associate pastors and under the guidance of a senior pastor or larger denominational board who reinforced harmful organizational practices (specifically: Glen, Sara, and Eli all had senior pastors they reported to).

Implications for Over-identification & Conflicted Identification

This research gives a deeper insight into just *how* identified church workers are with their organization. Whereas enmeshment conflates different social, personal, and professional identities (e.g., pastor, friend, family), over-identification occurs when an individual's identity is subsumed by their organization; Avanzi (2012) also describes overidentification as “a form of excessive identification” (p. 290) that is associated with work habits rather than relationships . Kaufman (1960) spoke of forest rangers' identification: “They practically merge the individual's identity with the identity of the organization; the organization is as much a part of the members as they are of it” (as cited in Cheney, 1983b, p. 345). Marty referred to his connection with the church in an eerily similar manner: “The church is as much a reflection of me as I am of it.” Though Ashforth's (2016) description of identification as rooted in the hearts and minds of individuals felt grisly, it gave an accurate description of how participants enacted their church's values. They went so far as to deny their individual wants and needs in order to uphold their church's mission and image at all costs. In this section, I will differentiate faith-based overwork from workaholism, conceptualize targets for over-identification, and assess how over-identification and conflicted identification are interrelated.

Though Avanzi and colleagues (2012) initially linked over-identification with workaholism, I offer over-identification not as a result of workaholism but as a result of forced

overwork, especially in FBOs. Workaholism is understood as a compulsion to work that exceeds expectations or perform more work than is required (Andraessen, 2014). Some scholars use overwork interchangeably with workaholism (Andraessen, 2014); however, that conflates the two terms. For some of these churches, overwork *was* the expectation. Adding a spiritual dimension to overwork and over-identification complicates their definitions, as organizations in this study used faith-based claims to uphold expectations of overwork.

For example, definitions of what constituted work were loose and often up to the discretion of supervisors. Some church workers questioned whether they should clock in or if the work they were doing was considered as volunteering their time—recall Cassie’s inner conflict: “Is what I’m doing right now my job or am I volunteering?” Other workers at churches had roles that necessitated overwork as part of the job description. Hegemonic scripts that church members’ eternal lives were affected by the work that was being done were explicitly and implicitly conveyed to these workers, as seen in the “souls at stake” findings. There were certainly church workers who did engage in workaholism, but risking salvation *necessitated* overwork rather than it being an individual choice. At times, participants did not identify with their individual church because of this forced overwork. Rather, they identified with the larger mission of spreading and teaching their Christian faith—in fact, they used their identification with a larger faith to justify their work.

Specifically, some participants used over-identification as a sensemaking practice for conflicted identification. When encountering dissonance and conflicted identification, participants would over-identify with the larger Christian faith and ignore or acquiesce to problematic organizational practices. Here, they reproduced discourses and sacrificial actions that put the church’s mission above their own conflict with church leaders or disidentification

with other targets. Rhetoric that souls were at stake or that sacrifice is what is needed to uphold a mission then reproduced overwork. Though it may be leadership or a larger Christian culture that instigated overwork, dedication to the church's mission was the highest priority. Cheney (1983a) suggested that participants who were identified with an organization would put the welfare of the organization first. Participants did this so much that they put the church's mission above their own individual needs.

Church workers' responses to conflicted identification were to avoid, disapprove, confront, or exit. Tactics like avoidance and disapproving from afar were akin to being blinded by overidentification with a mission. Church workers put the salvific goal of church work above problems they had with individuals within the church. In fact, Conroy and colleagues (2016) suggested that in-group biases may function as sensemaking to deal with unethical climates. For this study, participants' over-identification with the mission functioned as a blinding (Yip, et al., 2010) and sensemaking tool to deal with destructive behaviors from the organization. Participants used their over-identification with the church as a blinding tool to ignore conflict. For example, one may avoid dissonance by purposefully being ignorant of leaderships' mistakes. Recall that Cassie did this when she asked co-workers to not share inner organizational conflicts with her. Next, the individual may disapprove of the actions from afar but neglect to take tangible action, like Eli sharing about his pastors' conflict and Janae directly observing a fight between two co-workers. Both participants expressed that they wish they could have directly called out the hypocrisy, but ultimately decided not to bring attention to the conflict.

In contrast, one may explicitly call out mistreatment or discrepancies and risk being met with anger or hegemonic scripts from the organization. These tactics are like putting disidentification sunglasses on. By becoming "anti-church practice," participants were no longer

blinded by over-identification with faith. For example, Nehemiah and Isabelle both called out poor practices in their church directly to their supervisors and were met with leadership communicating sacrificial expectations. Finally, an individual may exit the organization once the dissonance is too intense. Nearly all participants did this in the end and experienced burnout and traumatic work. However, disidentification did provide an avenue for participants to call out poor work practices, similar to Kreiner and Ashforth's (2004) study that disidentified workers may be more inclined to whistleblowing. No matter the tactic, conflicted identification and over-identification still produced dissonance in participants.

Therefore, I maintain that burnout is exacerbated by conflicted identification and over-identification. While multiple identifications and groups may be helpful as safe spaces to reduce anxiety and negotiate identity tensions (Lammers, et al. 2013; Silva & Sias, 2010), as soon as problems occurred in churches, it was difficult for participants who wanted to uphold the mission to react. Some felt they could not trust coworkers, others could not vent problems to those they were serving, and other participants indicated that they were met with unsatisfactory responses from supervisors if they were to share identity tensions. Thus, a lack of social support stemming from conflicted or over-identification led to burnout.

It is worth noting that these findings represent samples from individuals who had particularly toxic church experiences and poor leadership. There is hope that responses to conflicted over-identification and over-identification like the call out tactic may result in a positive change within the organization (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Liu, et al., 2016). However, that was not the case for participants in this specific study.

Conceptualizing a Faithful Face

Though not the original goal of this study, participants responded that they struggled with feelings of authenticity, performance, and expectations as identified through the tightrope metaphor. Based on participants' reflections of this balance, I have conceptualized the *faithful face* which occurs when a church worker tries to balance authenticity with boundaries. They often wanted to remain true to themselves and not put on a performance, but there was a certain energy they had to emulate. If one were to create a Venn diagram that included emotional-spiritual labor, facework, and authentic leadership, the faithful face would rest in the center. .

The faithful face begins to bridge emotional and spiritual labor concepts together. Shenoy-Packer (2013) offers a compelling insight into this through their study of female Hindu priests, where they conceptualized emotional-spiritual labor as “a process that requires the embodying and enacting of religiously or spiritually appropriate beliefs, values, speech, and dress performed at times when the laity (or followers) need them” (p. 187). Shenoy-Packer cited both the emotional and spiritual labor literature to create this hybrid term. I argue that the faithful face is an extension of, but not completely equivalent to, emotional-spiritual labor.

As I conceptualize it, the faithful face is an attitude that church workers embody to meet the social setting of church that is not wholly fake nor wholly authentic. Because highly identified church workers see themselves as an extension or reflection of the church, they are often constrained to act in a certain persona (or, have a certain face). While it is valuable to share struggles with a congregation, it can also be harmful. Emotional-spiritual labor necessitates that the individual must embody “religiously or spiritually appropriate beliefs,” (Shenoy-Packer, 2013, p. 187), however participants were more concerned with authenticity than with religious expectations. In other words, emotional-spiritual labor suggested an embodied performance. A

faithful face is a way of *always* being religious, not just when church members need them to be. The faithful face, then, privileges authenticity over performance.

Next, the name “faithful face” was inspired by literature on facework and identity. Goffman (1955) defined face as a way of presenting oneself to meet other’s social expectations. Domenici and Littlejohn (2006) describe it as a “never-ending process of presenting self to others” (p. 11). In this instance, not only were individuals presenting themselves to others, but they were also presenting their church and its mission to others through their actions. Recall Sean saying that he had a “way of being in public as a pastor” that was still part of himself but not wholly true. Though, participants that expressed the faithful face were concerned with their *authenticity* and less about the social embarrassment or shame that facework attempts to avoid (Goffman, 2003). In fact, Goffman noted that mutual acceptance in facework “tends to be based not on agreement of candidly expressed heart-felt evaluations, but upon a willingness to give temporary lip service to judgments with which the participants do not really agree” (p. 7). Thus, the faithful face can be seen as an *extension of* but not *completely like* facework, as it instead focuses on authenticity.

Finally, the data also supports McCauley and Gardner’s (2016) concept of an Authentic Leader (AL) in pastors. AL is characterized by “self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective” (Gardner, et al., 2009, p. 468). Just as McCauley and Gardner (2016) suggested, when participants felt that their work was inauthentic, it exacerbated feelings of burnout and exhaustion. While participants did have to present themselves through facework, they also tried to be as authentic as they could. When they had to be inauthentic in their presentation or saw other pastors being inauthentic, they felt it was a disservice to their very role as a church worker. For example, Eli shared an experience where he

witnessed two of his pastors fighting in private. They later acted like everything was fine in front of the congregation, and Eli called it a “disservice to [one’s] role as pastor.” Moreover, Janae saw the youth pastor and administrator in an argument later pretend that it never happened. She described this encounter as “obviously not scriptural.” Participants painted inauthentic leadership as something antithetical to the holy, sacred work they were positioned to do.

While the concept of faithful face must be examined further, this data offers a promising start to further complicate emotional-spiritual labor, facework, and authenticity in spiritual work. During the interview process, church workers were adamant that authenticity was key to their work, but they did need to make concentrated efforts to maintain a balance between revealing their full selves and still upholding personal boundaries and separation. Ultimately, the faithful face only begins to understand faith-based identity negotiations rather than fully theorize them.

Implications for Spiritual Labor

This study offers a few significant implications for spiritual labor literature. These findings suggest that discourses of spiritual labor are found in the dark side of church communication and represent messages of problematic work. As mentioned earlier, spiritual labor is a discursive process, where individuals must interact with co-constructed ideas of spirituality within their organizations (McGuire, 2010; Chappell, et al., 2022). While this is by no means an exhaustive nor exclusive study of spiritual labor, it gives more insight into experiences that may bridge McGuire’s (2010) and Chappell and colleague’s (2022) work. Specifically, I identify particular instances of spiritual labor discourse and how local organizational discourses may represent and affirm problematic, larger Christian Discourses.

Participants reported different types of religious rhetoric that impacted their jobs. Marty shared the hegemonic script of “burning out in church instead of burning up in hell.” Glen gave

examples of expectations that congregation members had, like asking “Well don’t you love serving Jesus?” when he would try to set a boundary. Sean explicitly reported that authority figures in the larger church had told him to spiritually commodify community members. These specific examples of socially induced spiritual labor were little d-discourses from a) outside of the organization, b) voluntary members of the organization, and c) leadership.

Spiritual labor discourses could come from outside of the church and stand the test of time. Recall when Marty was in church work, he started to get messages from more tenured workers at other churches that to be a pastor was to engage in overwork because of the role’s spiritual implications. These were memorable messages, which are understood as messages individuals receive that are “remembered for a long time” and have “a profound influence on a person’s life” (Knapp, et al., 1981). Though these people were not in leadership at the church he planted, he carried on their memorable messages into the church he created. Therefore, this shows that socially constructed messages of spiritual labor were not constrained by time or individual organization—rather, they could be an unhealthy model that one accepted and carried into future work.

Moreover, messages of spiritual labor did not even have to come directly from leadership or even co-workers. Reflecting on Glen’s case, expectations of spirituality came from those he was serving in his role as a pastor. The question “Well, don’t you love serving Jesus?” as a response to boundary setting created dissonance. Glen did not believe boundary setting was antithetical to his faith, but he also did take these spirituality discourses to heart. This also disrupted expectations of power in church structures. Instead of the pastor preaching to the congregation, the congregation members were (unhealthily) extorting the pastor. In this instance

of spiritual labor, Glen's spiritual identity and work blended together (in fact, were enmeshed) so that he could not perform one without affecting the other.

Finally, I return to Sean's experience that looked most traditionally like McGuire's (2010) original conceptualization of spiritual labor. Like Marty, this message was from more tenured church workers trying to explain how churches ought to operate. Sean's leaders communicated that he needed to see community members as potential church members and people he could serve. In other words, they imposed the expectation that Sean ought to, in his words, "commodify" others and encouraged him to reproduce this labor. He recalled hating having to do this, akin to McGuire's (2010) idea of *spiritual dissonance*, when one's identity is in contrast with what the larger organization expects them to do. Sean had to manage his own identity and convictions against what his organization expected of him; in the end, he chose to exit for identity preservation.

All these workers eventually exited their organization. Glen and Sean attributed some of the exit as a response to inducements to spiritual labor. Thus, exit was for one's self-preservation and as a tool to reject spiritual discourses that seemed antithetical to one's own identity. Marty, instead, embodied the spiritual labor discourse he was told early on until he eventually left church work entirely. While some participants may temporarily acquiesce to discourses about labor, their eventual responses were to exit after encountering compounding spiritual dissonance. Other participants were prepared to continue emulating and reproducing spiritual labor until exit forced them to reflect on its implications.

Furthermore, there were implications for spiritual labor discourse in this study. McGuire (2010) defined spiritual labor in terms of supervisors commodifying employees. Chappell and colleagues (2022) re-framed spiritual labor as interactions that happen between individuals,

peers, and organizations, where the single member is an individual actor. Here, I further these researchers' original claims by offering spiritual discourse as an indicator of larger, religious Discourses.

Specifically, individual discourses of spiritual labor can affect the broader social scene. Gee (2015) describes little “d” discourses as any use of language and big “D” Discourse to refer to broader social identity enactment, where “Big D Discourse analysis embeds the little ‘d’ discourse analysis into the ways in which language melds with bodies and things to create society and history” (p. 2). Even if participants did not totally accept the messages they received from others in the church, the messages still reflected larger Discourses in Christian culture.

Messages like spiritualized justification for burnout, boundaries being disrespected through religious guilt, and the entrepreneurial expectation to commodify for Christ in order to maintain a thriving church can all be constituted as an invitation for spiritual labor. Thus, for the participants in this study, to do good work in a church was to work without boundaries, constantly sacrificing, and evangelizing at all costs. Chappell and colleagues (2022) noted that inducements to identification may also act as spiritual labor. They explained mission statements and crafted messages can blur “the boundary between individual and organization” (p. 326) as an individual decides how to respond and take up spirituality in their work. The work of an individual Christian and the labor of a church worker are then conflated.

All these spiritual labor discourses reflect expectations that church workers utilize a collectively constituted faith to determine what defines a “good Christian” or a “good church worker.” Additionally, taking up salvific discourses that eternal lives are at stake turns Christianity into an exclusive, invitation-only religion. If church workers can give salvation, they may also be able to control whose salvation is revoked or returned. Garner and Peterson’s (2018)

article about member-abusive organizations features problematic discourses from leadership that use church membership and faith as threats against leaving Mars Hill church. Accepting these spiritual labor messages furthers a Discourse that faith and salvation is exchanged through human hands instead of on a spiritual level. Thus, salvation becomes controlled rather than a free gift. Ultimately, it is worthwhile to examine not just how spiritual labor is constructed, but what the implications of such discourse are.

Reflection in interviews allowed participants to reject spiritual labor in retrospect. While in the moment, participants may have permitted the discourse, they pointed out later that it was harmful. It is useful to call out and reject problematic spiritual discourses to prevent destructive Discourses and for engaged research to help churches re-evaluate what messages they are reproducing within their work and to their congregations. Again, while this is not an exhaustive review of spiritual labor, this research seeks to identify and problematize d/Discourses of spiritual labor.

Passion Exploitation and Spiritual Labor. While the discussion thus far has examined discourses of spiritual labor (as called for by Chappell and colleagues, 2022), it is worthwhile to also examine spiritual labor's connection to passion exploitation (Kim, et al., 2020). Passion exploitation is understood to be a way that organizational leadership may use a worker's passion to "legitimize the unfair treatment of passionate workers" (Kim, et al., 2020, p. 123), of which church workers may be a perfect example. Kim and colleagues (2020) explain that two basic assumptions of passion exploitation are that those performing the work are people who would already volunteer for this position, unpaid, and that this work is personally meaningful and rewarding. The commodification aspect of McGuire's (2010) initial definition of spiritual labor was akin to spiritual exploitation—where those in power may take advantage of one's spirituality

and offer it as a service and reflection of the organization's "brand of spirituality" (p. 84).

Whereas spiritual labor is concerned with discourses and expectations of an individual's enactment of spirituality, passion (or, spiritual) exploitation critically analyses the individual's motivation and legitimization of exploitation. This connection may also align with Molloy and colleagues (2019) literature on supervisors exploiting an individual's work calling.

There were several examples of passion (spiritual) exploitation in this study, from Cassie's negotiation of her labor as work or as volunteering to conflating the mission of a church worker with the mission of a Christian. The sacrificial rhetoric and spiritual labor discourses discussed earlier engendered further passion (spiritual) exploitation by normalizing and legitimizing unfair work practices for the sake of faith. Thus, passion (spiritual) exploitation is a fruitful avenue for future study of FBOs, especially churches.

Studying Faith-Based Organizations

As this study concludes, it is valuable to note that what organizational communication may deem a harmful practice is often *biblical*. For example, using familial language for workplace relationships, sacrificing one's time to further the mission, and using faith-based inducements as a catalyst to work harder, can all come from messages in the Bible. However, exploiting members' faith and internalized spiritual discourses can be a tool to turn true, good work into destructive practices. Here, I complicate the use of faith, Buzzanell and Harter's (2006) secular hegemony, and give my intentions for these critiques.

Faith itself does not corrupt; rather, misaligned and dysfunctional faith practices can create harmful experiences. Destructive spiritual discourses come from faith-based sources: misinterpretations of the Bible, salvific notions, and sacrificial expectations. Faith acted as an inducement for identification and buying into an organization's mission more by establishing

common ground and aligned values (Cheney, 1983). However, these findings have shown that it is easy to conflate being a good church worker with accepting poor church practices for the sake of faith. Realistically, church work adds spiritual, eternal, and often inflexible expectations to the worker. To repair this, churches and workers alike must consistently re-evaluate their faith-based expectations: Are they used to blindly promote the church or are they realistic, healthy biblical standards?

As scholars continue to study faith-based organizations, specifically churches, they must re-train their interpretations of findings. Just as Buzzanell and Harter (2006) suggested, we must move away from secular hegemony when researching churches and faith-based organizations. It is worthwhile to explore intersections between organizational communication and spirituality, but researchers need to be aware that the common organizational communication theories and practices we see as harmful or exploitative may be part of a faith-based culture. While familial rhetoric made some participants become enmeshed, it was also a solution for others who thought seeing coworkers as family could reframe church's capitalistic business practices. Participants noted that they sacrificed a lot for organizations, but those organizations should also have sacrificed in return for them or allowed them to rest. Deborah addressed this pervasive issue in her reflection, explaining that the church needs to take its own beliefs seriously. Surely, churches need better organizational practices, but these practices will not mirror a U.S. American, capitalist businesses. Perhaps studies like these give an impetus for spiritual-organizational communication theories to arise, rather than trying to fit spiritual experiences into worldly, academic boxes.

Practically, this discussion section attempts to call out the issues that occur when faith-based identification goes poorly. However, I do not intend to villainize the Christian faith.

Rather, I argue for better practices and healthier models. Enmeshment can be a natural tool to link oneself to their religious community. Church does not have to be a place for overwork. The faithful face does not need to be a performance. Spiritual discourse can be inspiring, rather than exploitative. In the dark, there is still light.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this research come from both my understanding as a researcher as well as what practical solutions that participants offered. In summary, church organizations (locally and denominationally) could provide healthier models for what a church worker ought to do. Churches need to provide accountability, remove problematic discourse, take a posture of humility, and prioritize rest for their workers.

What seemed to upset participants most about their organizations was that there was rarely ever true accountability that took place. Lack of accountability can lead to bullying leaders and unfair, domineering treatment of staff, members, and fellow leaders alike (Kruger, 2022). While no participants reflected on explicit bullying from leadership, there were several instances where pastors, elder boards, and denominational leaders abused their power in minor ways. The point of this research is to understand the complexities between faith, identification, and burnout; essentially, it shows that, while faith can be a grounding tool to find one's identity, it can also blind people to follow leadership with their guard down. It shows how vulnerable church workers can be and how afraid they are to cause a stir (often worrying about "souls at stake" or feeling like it was impossible to stand up to toxic discourse). All of this points to a clear solution: Churches need a better accountability system.

Next, it is necessary to also erase problematic, hegemonic scripts from the church, like the idea of "burning out in church" rather than "burning up in hell" or the notion that "souls are

at stake.” Rather, church workers must take a posture of humility, as Molloy and colleagues (2019) suggest, to not only avoid burnout, but to see themselves in a healthier light within the church. Molloy and colleagues (2019) offer humility as the “ability to assist individuals in recognizing the difference between one’s work and the broader purpose that work serves” (p. 433). By accepting spiritual roles as a *partnership* with the divine rather than as a delegate of salvation, some burden of church work is removed. Moreover, by accepting this relationship as a partnership, there may be more space to remove arbitrary boundaries and make space for church workers to share their problems with confidants in the congregation.

When recruiting for this research, a stranger messaged me on Facebook to say they hoped that I would balance out this study with church workers who had not burnt out and quit. Even that language is problematic; by assuming those that remain in church work have not been burnt out (or, even, that they were arbitrarily strong enough to push through burnout), it delegitimizes experiences of church workers hurt by the ministry they felt called to serve. Moreover, it erases those who were forced out of the church by toxic leadership, who had to leave because of budgetary constraints, and whose church plants fizzled out. Narratives about church work must be re-examined not just from an organizational viewpoint, but from a societal perspective. Cospers’ (2021a) and Garner and Peterson’s (2018) critiques of Mars Hill’s discourse are a suitable start to expose harmful church rhetoric. Notably, churches must be able to delineate if their language is *biblical* or if it is an extension of their own religious beliefs and agenda. While this may be done internally, it also may be useful to bring in third parties and religious consulting groups to analyze discourse.

Finally, the church must prioritize rest and boundaries. Not only do they need to create space for pastors to leave the pulpit, but churches also need to implement better organizational

structures that do not make church workers feel that tasks will be left unaccomplished if they need to clock out or take a break. This is work that needs to be done on a structural level and by holistic church communities: leadership, staff, volunteers, and congregation members alike. Recall that discourses of spiritual labor did not come solely from leadership. They were conveyed by church members, individuals who worked at other churches, and were larger Christian Discourses. Simply put, a yearly pastoral retreat is not enough. Significant change must be made within church structures to allow rest, promote boundaries, and ameliorate destructive discourse.

For churches seeking out solutions, it may be worthwhile to ask the following questions: a) if you removed the lead pastor, would your church's identity be at risk? b) Who provides accountability for your pastor? Elder board? Congregation? Are there are both internal and external methods of accountability? c) What kind of opportunities for rest and boundaries do you offer your workers? How do you assess a need for rest? How does your church practice Sabbathing? Additionally, Kruger (2022) offers helpful solutions to prevent narcissistic or abusive leaders in the church, like having a rotating board of elders, limiting pastoral power, and increasing transparency of church leadership meetings. These may also work as initial solutions to create healthier church systems.

Limitations & Future Directions

This thesis offers fruitful future directions and limitations. While it was useful to discover how interrelated identification, faith, burnout, and spiritual labor could be, a narrowed study into one specific phenomenon could be useful for future iterations of this research. Moreover, engaging in different demographics with these research questions could produce interesting

comparative research. It is also useful to explore tangentially related communication theories that were only just mentioned in this study.

To begin, this research covered a very limited scope of religious workers while also covering *too* broad of a scope. For example, this study limited itself to Protestant Christians (a limited scope), but of any denomination (too broad of a scope to generalize all Protestant Christians' experiences). Future iterations of similar research should consider doing an in-depth review of specific denominations, or even an ethnographic study of a singular church. For example, perceptions of performance and authenticity can differ greatly between a Pentecostal denomination (which focuses on spiritual gifts) and Anglican denomination (which focuses on liturgy and tradition). It is also worthwhile to consider how other branches of Christianity (Western, Eastern, Restorationists) experience faith, identification, and burnout. Even more, how might other spiritual groups' experiences of these phenomena differ from Christians?

Next, future research could focus on experiences from different demographics. This study proved to have a homogenous sampling, so further research into underrepresented identities could provide salient data. Indeed, stories from pastors in this study who hold intersectional identities, like Sara, Deborah, and Sean, illuminated experiences of marginalized pastoral groups. Rebecca's story of coming from a family that assimilated to become Christian, American, and white suggests studying non-white churches comprised of immigrants and first-generation Americans could be fruitful for ethnographic study. Moreover, this study also yielded a younger generation of participants, which may inadvertently reveal shifts in how modern generations understand work, loyalty, and career mobilization (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Comparing organizational exit experiences between younger and older generations can generate further research.

Additionally, this thesis only looked at the experiences of those who have *left* church work. It would be valuable to pair this study with one that looks at the experiences of those that have not exited their church work role. Then, a comparative analysis of the two might give further insight into OI, burnout, and spiritual labor. McNamee and Gould's (2018) research along with Garner and Peterson's (2018) work were key pieces that helped conceptualize OI and exit. However, it is worthwhile to expand beyond those who have left church work. Those who remain employed in churches may have different motivations, perceptions, and experiences of faith, identification, spiritual labor, and burnout. Perhaps they are blinded by over-identification, but they may also offer preventative solutions and ways to create healthier church workspaces. There is research that assesses how faith impacts current members of religious organizations (Galliard & Wong, 2017; Garner, 2016; Shenoy-Packer, 2013), but few take up the call to identify these communication phenomena *in situ*.

Next, while this study only planned on addressing faith, identification, burnout, and spiritual labor, it also offers future directions to study face negotiation, authentic leadership, emotional labor, identity tensions, and sensemaking. It is worthwhile to see how these concepts are interconnected. Guiding questions may be: How might the faithful face be another method of face negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 1985) or an expanded model of Goffman's (1955) face? What connections are there between authentic leadership and identification? What kind of emotional labor do church *members* engage in? What kind of identity tensions do church workers need to manage in their place of work? How might a church worker use faith as a sensemaking tool in the face of conflicted identification or over-identification? What is the relationship between religious guilt and passion exploitation? Answering these questions can be a fruitful start to

practically exploring healthier church models. Moreover, these questions further complicate current organizational communication scholarship by adding a spiritual lens and religious ethics.

Furthermore, few studies, if any, have looked at spiritual labor within a church organization. Chappell and colleagues (2022) article reimagining McGuire's (2010) conceptualization of spiritual labor is relatively new. More research analyzing spiritual labor and Shenoy-Packer's (2013) emotional-spiritual labor is necessary to holistically address spiritual discourses. These studies may also critically analyze spiritual labor as language from dominant groups that reinforces spiritual hegemony and religious guilt. Overall, as Chappell and colleagues (2022) affirm, more studies analyzing the construction and effects of spiritual labor are necessary so researchers can gain a better understanding of the co-constructed phenomenon.

Finally, these findings are not just limited to church work. It would be valuable to further explore the faithful face and passion exploitation (Kim, et al., 2020) to see how other professions like teachers, healthcare providers, geriatric care workers, and nonprofit employees balance authenticity with boundaries. McCauley and Gardner's (2016) piece begins to address authenticity in leaders, however negotiation of one's authenticity is not just limited to leadership. Moreover, research ought not to just look at one's projection of authenticity like emotional labor does (Hochschild, 1979), but also look at how individuals balance authenticity and boundaries without putting on a performance. Essentially, how do individuals act when they want to stay true to their own character but also face expectations from others? Ultimately, this research produces more questions than it answers—but all are worthwhile queries to address.

Conclusion

Though this critical research felt disheartening at times, it is worthwhile to amplify stories of those who have been exploited in church work. Ultimately, spiritual rhetoric and

expectations reproduced enmeshment, over-identification, and spiritual labor for individuals, which resulted in worker burnout. These phenomena often occur simultaneously and while it is valuable to parse out their differences, research should not ignore their interconnected relationships. As we continue to do the work as scholars, practitioners, and Christians, to make churches a better place, we can be encouraged by Janae's sentiment that "the harvest is coming," so long as we do not grow weary of doing the good work.

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APPENDIX A:

Christian Denominations Visual

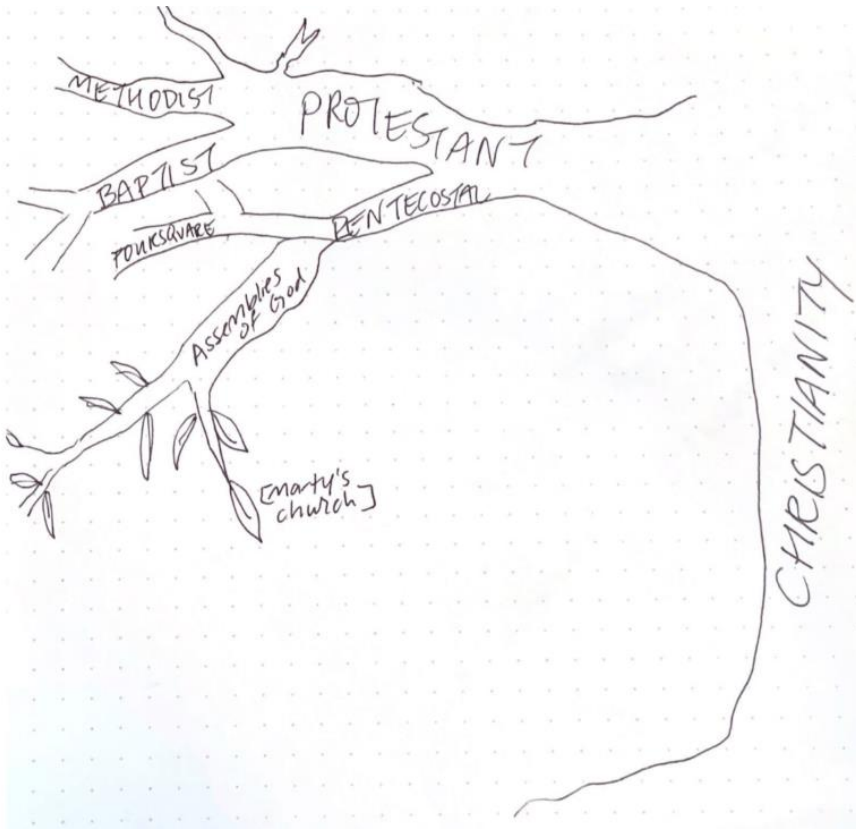


Figure A1:

Visual representation of how denominations break off of the main tree of Christianity. Note that Assemblies of God branches from the Pentecostal denomination which branches from the Protestant tradition.

APPENDIX B:

LETTER OF RECRUITMENT

Protocol Title: When Work is Worship: Studying Identification and Faith in Church Workers

Have you considered how your work experiences are affected when your place of work is also your place of worship?

My name is Autumn Neal and I'm a graduate student at Colorado State University. I have been passionate about studying religious organizations and their employees for the past four years. As a Christian myself, I am privy to the good and the bad we can encounter when church *is* work. I'd like to invite you to participate in my research study about identification and faith while working in a church.

This research study is titled: "When Work is Worship: Identification and Faith in Church Workers." The Principal Investigator is Dr. Elizabeth Williams, an associate professor in the Communication Studies Department at Colorado State, and I am the Co-Principle Investigator. We would invite you to participate in an online survey and interview. Participation for the survey will take approximately 10 minutes, and the interview will take approximately 60 minutes. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

If you have worked in a church for at least 12 months within the past 3 years and were compensated in some fashion (monetarily, housing accommodations, etc.) you are eligible to participate in this study.

We will be collecting your name, email, and information about your church employment tenure. When we report and share the data to others, we will combine the data from all participants. We will keep your data confidential; your name and data will be kept separately on a password-protected document accessible only to the research team. While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on how faith affects one's work experience in a church.

There are no known risks to participating in this research. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential (but unknown) risks.

To indicate your willingness to participate in this research and to continue on to the survey, click here: <survey link>

If you have any questions about the research, please contact Autumn Neal at autumn.neal@colostate.edu or Dr. Elizabeth Williams at elizabeth.a.williams@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at CSU_IRB@colostate.edu ; 970-491-1553.

If you know anyone else who would also be interested in interviewing, you are welcome to direct them to me as well. Thank you for your time, I look forward to hearing from you!

All the best,

Autumn Neal

M.A. Student, Department of Communication Studies, Colorado State University

APPENDIX C:

SOCIAL MEDIA RECRUITMENT SCRIPT & GRAPHIC

For: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, & LinkedIn

Hi, all! I'm currently starting to recruit participants for my thesis. It is a research project for Colorado State University's Department of Communication Studies that asks "What happens when your place of work is also your place of worship?" titled "When Work is Worship: Identification and Faith in Church Workers." I'm looking for compensated church workers have worked in a church for at least twelve months within the last three years (and left this job), identified as a Christian during their tenure, and identified as a member of the church. The study requires participants to fill out a brief survey and complete a 60 minute interview with me, either on Zoom or in person. It will help give insight to church worker's lived experiences and an opportunity to talk about, reflect, and even process what it's like to work in a church. If you are interested (or know someone who may be), please take some time to fill out this preliminary survey or reach out to me at autumn.neal@colostate.edu or the principle investigator at elizabeth.a.williams@colostate.edu. Thank you! <survey link>

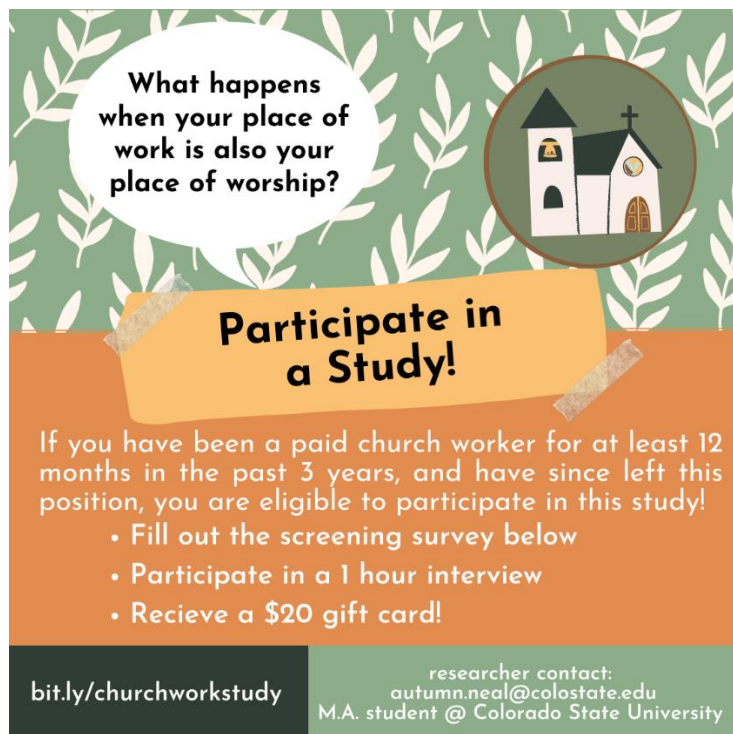


Figure B:

Shows the social media promotion that was used for this study, which provides information: a) qualifications for participation, b) what participation will entail, c) a link to sign up for participation, and d) the researcher contact information

APPENDIX D:

QUALTRICS SCREENING SURVEY

Ex-Church Workers Screening Survey

ExpertReview score **Great**

Introduction

☐ Q21



Thank you for being willing to participate in this study about church workers! I have 8 questions to ask in the following 2 screens that will go over your church employment and how to contact you for an interview. All of this data will remain confidential and in a password-protected drive accessible only to the researchers. Feel free to email Autumn Neal at autumn.neal@colostate.edu if you have any questions regarding this study. Thank you for your time!



Import from library

Add new question

Screening

Q1



Have you been employed at a church and been compensated (monetarily, housing, etc.) for your work within the last three years?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Q2



List the start (and end) date(s) of your employment.

Q23



Were you a member at this church during your time of employment?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Provide your own answer:

Q3



Are you 18 years of age or older?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

▼ Contact Information



Q18

Finally, please provide your contact information so I can reach out for an interview.

Q12



What is your name?

Q13



What is your email?

Q16



How would you like your interview to take place?

- ☐ In person (local to Fort Collins, CO)
- ☐ Zoom
- ☐ Phone
- ☐ Other (describe)

Q17



What are some available dates & times you have to meet in the next few weeks?



Import from library

+ Add new question

[Add Block](#)

End of Survey

Thank you for taking time to participate in this survey. If you qualify, you can expect an email from Autumn Neal within the next 2-3 days to schedule your interview.

Please reach out with any questions to autumn.neal@colostate.edu. Your responses are appreciated!

APPENDIX E:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Hi, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me. Do I have your permission to record this conversation for transcription purposes?

Okay, thank you!/Alright, no worries. Let me grab a notebook to take some notes.

Just to begin, the overall intention for this study is to explore how identity, identification, and faith play a role in your job. We'll talk about your experiences today and once I've collected data from the other participants, I'll analyze it and then check in with you again and you can let me know your impressions of it.

So, I have a few questions for you today. We'll talk about your specific role and your church and then move into some identity and values questions and then wrap up by talking about burnout. At the end, I'll stop the recording. Overall, it should take about thirty to sixty minutes. Do you have any questions for me before we start?

1. Tell me about the church you worked for.
 - a. Are you still working with them?
 - b. How long have you/did you work with them?
 - c. Do you attend the church you work for?
 - d. Describe your position(s).
 - e. Describe the people you worked with.
 - f. What drew you to this church in the first place?
 - g. What would you say your church's core values are?
2. Tell me about a time that you felt connected to your church.
 - a. How do you feel about working at a church?
 - b. How does being a church worker affect how you see yourself?
 - c. When you're not at work, how much do you talk about work?
 - d. Is there anything that makes you feel like you identify with your church?
 - e. How do you get along with your coworkers? Your superiors? The people you serve?
 - f. How do you feel connected to your church? Your denomination? Your faith as a whole?
 - g. Have there ever been times where any of these felt like they conflicted or were in tension with one another?
 - i. (follow-up) Have you ever felt your roles in the church conflicted with other roles you have (whether that be another church role, an identity, or something outside of the church)? Tell me about it.
3. Can you tell me about a time where working at a church has strengthened your faith?
 - a. Can you tell me about a time where working at a church has challenged your faith?

4. When I was starting to create this study, a question I had was “what happens when your place of work is also your place of worship?” – how would you describe your experience working in a *faith-based* organization?
 - a. Is the experience of being an employee different from just being a member of a church? How come?
 - b. Have you had a job outside of the church? If so, ...How would you describe church work vs. secular job?
 - i. Do you hold your organization/job to a different standard than you would in a secular position? (e.g., being more forgiving of wrongs or more convicted that as a religious organization they should do more)
 - c. Has your faith ever felt like a performance at your job?
5. Has there ever been a time where you felt your personal values conflicted with the church’s values/what your job was asking you to do? Give an example.
 - a. (if no) If you were ever asked to do something outside of your comfort zone at work, how would you respond? (e.g., not share information, work over hours, etc.)
 - b. What is faith’s role when you are working at the church? Can you tell me about a time where it may have felt like you were performing your faith?
6. Sometimes when people do what they love and follow their passion/calling, it can lead to burnout or overworking themselves. How does this resonate with you?
 - a. What is burnout for you?
 - i. In our literature, it’s conceptualized as over-exhaustion, inefficacy, and cynicism. Let’s dig into it a bit more...
 - b. Do you feel like your role has manageable expectations/duties?
 - c. Have you ever felt over-exhausted at work? Tell me about it.
 - d. Have you felt like you couldn’t do your job? Tell me about it.
 - e. Have you ever become cynical about your work? Tell me about it.
7. Tell me about a time when you felt overworked in your position.
 - a. Is there anything you wish your organization would have done?
 - b. Is there anything your organization *should* have done differently?
8. There has been some research that’s come out to describe the phrase “spiritual labor.” This means that the culture of your organization—whether specifically stated by leadership or something inside yourself—necessitates that you have to *act* spiritual. How does this resonate with you?
9. If you had to describe your job in one word or one phrase, what would it be?
10. We’ve talked about your experiences in this organization—both the good and the bad. Why have you stayed at your job/why did you leave?
11. What made you want to participate in this study?
12. Is there anything I didn’t ask that you’d like to share or would be important for me to know?

Those are all the interview questions I have for you! I have a few demographic questions to ask as we wrap up.

1. I won’t use your real name for this study. Is there a name you would prefer for me to use or shall I assign one?

2. How old are you?
3. What gender do you identify with?
4. What is your race & ethnicity?
5. What denomination is/was your church?
6. How big is/was the congregation in your church?
7. How many people are/were employed in your church?
8. Who is/was considered part of the leadership team in your church?

After I complete these interviews and start the analysis, I'm planning to reach back out to participants and see how my analysis resonates with your experiences. What is the best email for me to use to reach out for a member reflection?

Thank you for your time today! I appreciate you trusting me with your time and experiences.