

Serving the Gospel of Spiritualism: A Study of Modern Spiritualist Ministers and their Calling

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Abstract

Since its birth in 1848, Spiritualism as a religion, science and philosophy has transitioned from a ragtag movement into a veritable religious tradition. At the center of this modern-religious movement are the ministers – those who have heeded the calling to God to serve those in need of spiritual guidance and to offer spirit communication, in some way, as “mediums.” As discovered through data collection and empirical research, ordained ministers of Spiritualism who purportedly have this gift were raised in a wide range of religious backgrounds, largely Christian-based, but followed a variety of belief systems before embracing Spiritualism as a religion. Based on case studies and fieldwork, as well as a plethora of data and research collected on the modern Spiritualist movement in America – both primary and secondary – this paper focuses upon the ethno-religious aspects of the religion, mediumship and the ministers themselves. One hundred Spiritualist ministers were initially surveyed, with 62 respondents, and 54 subjects ultimately accepted in the data collection portion of this study. A number of ministers offered additional research data through consultation and interviews. The purposes of this study were to determine whether modern Spiritualist ministers were raised in the religion, or actually converted to it from another, more mainstream religion; and if so, what relative factors existed which prompted them to serve the religion of Spiritualism as a minister? Also, did the ministers have a “calling” or an inner urge to pursue the vocation and was this precipitated by God? This paper addresses these questions.

Introduction

Spiritualism is one of only a few religions that was not “imported” to the United States, but instead was “exported” to other parts of the world. Early on, it made its way to Great Britain where it flourished. It eventually spread to other countries in Europe, Australia, and even to South and Central America, but it never did reach the masses outside the United States like Mormonism or Christian Science did – two other American-made religions that were exported from the shores of the United States.¹

Initially, the idea of this new religion was to be void of dogma, church tenets, creeds and doctrines. People were to be “free thinkers” accepting the truths from all religious traditions and sacred texts,

¹ It is interesting to note that these “American-made” religions all have their roots in upstate New York and were founded within decades of one another. One reason why Spiritualism failed to take hold as firmly as Mormonism and Christian Science is that from the beginning it was not an evangelical religion. It did not actively try to recruit adherents through missionary means. Also, both Mormonism and Christian Science were formed around cult figures (Joseph Smith for Mormonism and Mary Baker-Eddy for Christian Science). Spiritualism, as a movement, was not nearly as organized and as a result, the “religion” aspect of it took much longer to organize and develop.

allowing a free flowing of ideas and beliefs to transpire. Since many of the early Spiritualists had been Christians, many leaned toward organizing the movement modeled on a Christian-model simply because this is ultimately what they were most comfortable with and the only system they knew personally (churches, services, use of the Holy Bible, hymns, *etc.*).

At the heart of Spiritualism, though, was (and still is) the medium – a person sensitive to the vibration of spirit entities who can sense through a variety of means intuitive visions, feelings, sounds or voices, and smells, interpreting these as messages by those on the other side to those on the earth plane. Mediums and mediumship, in many aspects, have come a long way since the early days of the Spiritualist movement when anyone could claim to be a Spiritualist medium. A Spiritualist medium today, one that is board certified and thoroughly tested, goes through a rigorous course of study including (but not inclusive of) Spiritualism's history, belief system, and notable personas associated with the movement; metaphysical training; the Bible (as well as other sacred texts); healing; public speaking; platform decorum; ministerial ethics, and most importantly, perhaps, mediumship unfoldment and development. A percentage of these mediums then pursue ordination to become full-fledged ministers, legally permitted to perform weddings, christenings, and funerals.

Ordinarily, becoming an ordained Spiritualist minister requires dedication, commitment and perseverance just as it does in all other mainstream denominations. The process that Spiritualist organizations require people to complete in order to become ordained ministers varies in scope and effort. Aspiring ministers who wish to be ordained by an accredited Spiritualist organization generally must complete an extensive mediumship developmental program, as well as a battery of tests given in stages throughout their course of studies – both written and oral in the form of evidential demonstrations of mediumship. Just as in other traditional Christian denominations, the idea of a “calling” to serve God as a pastor should be paramount in a person's decision to continue their studies to completion and ordination.

This particular research study focuses upon this concept of receiving a “calling” to become a Spiritualist minister in God's service. In addition, the purposes of this study were to determine whether modern Spiritualist ministers were raised in the religion, or actually converted to it from another, more mainstream religion; and if so, what relative factors existed which prompted them to serve the religion of Spiritualism as a minister? This paper addresses these questions as well as modern trends among Spiritualist ministers and their mediumship.

A detailed fieldwork questionnaire and personal interviews were conducted by this researcher for this paper. The purpose in so doing was to gather as much data as possible regarding specific backgrounds, experiences and competencies relevant to Spiritualist ministers and their work (as identified by 54 ordained Spiritualist ministers who are currently ministering in some form). Some of the topics contained in the fieldwork research included questions on the ministers' demographic and personal data, including family background; their religious upbringing and experiences prior to becoming a Spiritualist and the idea of a “calling” and when and why they actively pursued the ministry.

The purpose of this study² was to determine what the present population of Spiritualist ministers' religious and spiritual backgrounds entailed, and why they decided to pursue Spiritualism as a religion, and did they receive a calling to the ministry as a vocation? In addition, the study endeavored to learn the process that encompasses becoming a minister. Three related studies previously published by this author aided greatly in qualifying and comparing the results with this study. Portions of the previous studies overlapped, allowing the use of previously published findings to be included in this paper (see Leonard (a), (b), 2005, and (c) 2009).

² This study was made possible, in part, due to a partial grant [*Gakucho Saryo Keihi*] awarded by Fukuoka University of Education, Munakata-shi, Fukuoka-ken, Japan.

The results of the study, which are described in the following sections, provide clear information that definitively supports the conclusions of this study focusing on the calling of contemporary Spiritualist ministers.

Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Demographic Data

This study was conducted on Spiritualist ministers who either reside in Spiritualist camps, have their own churches and congregations, or who are certified members in good standing of a recognized Spiritualist association. The participants had to be ordained Spiritualist ministers in order to participate in this study. One hundred questionnaires were distributed to Spiritualist ministers using a variety of methods to contact ordained Spiritualist ministers. The majority of the subjects, however, were selected through referral, meaning that once a core group of ministers was selected through personal contacts, these people then distributed the questionnaire on to other ordained ministers with the above criterion in place. This type of research sampling is referred to as "snowball sampling."

In snowball sampling researchers identify a small number of individuals who have characteristics in which they are interested. These people are then used as informants to identify, or put researchers in touch with, others who qualify for inclusion and these, in turn, identify yet others – hence the term snowball sampling. This method is useful for sampling a population where access is difficult, maybe because it is a sensitive topic or where communication networks are underdeveloped. The task for the researcher is to establish who are the critical or key informants with whom initial contact must be made. (Cohen, *et al*, 104)

A decision was made early on to make the study as pervasive as possible in order to extrapolate the most up-to-date and accurate data reflecting the current conditions of ordained Spiritualist ministers today. Although the primary instrument (fieldwork questionnaire) utilized a combination of a Likert scale (*e.g.* "please mark accordingly – strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree") and checklist scale (*e.g.* "please check the items that pertain to you"), several portions of the questionnaire involved more open-ended questions, generating a large amount of research data that needed to be collated and interpreted.

In retrospect, perhaps a survey that encompassed only a checklist or rating method might have made it easier to collocate and analyze the data generated, but ultimately it was decided to combine both configurations in the question design in order not to limit the subjects in their responses. Also, I could not assume to know all the possible responses that subjects might be able to provide – which certainly was the case, as many respondents mentioned areas and experiences that I would never have thought to include in a checklist or Likert format. The responses, in general, were thoughtful, lengthy, and rich with detail.

Statistics on the Gender of the Participants

The genders of the participants in this study were 70% female and 30% male. The research data shows that the religion is predominantly made up of women. Historically, this is also true from its inception. Spiritualism and spirit communication eventually served to offer women an active voice in religion, as well as positions of authority in churches, at a time when women were largely relegated to doing housework and to raising a family. Eventually, Spiritualism would give women a vocation – a career – in which they could nurture a profession that was separate from their dependence upon any male figure (whether it be a husband, father, brother, uncle, grandfather, or son). (See Leonard ^(a), 2005; Leonard ^(b), 2005)

Women were expected to accept and be satisfied with secondary and subordinate roles – not only in society, but also in church leadership, church services, and even in church politics. Women were generally not allowed to preach from the pulpit, and were largely forbidden from becoming ordained. Spiritualism as a religion and belief system offered women equality by changing many of the steadfast, traditional rules

that had governed women, religion, spirituality, and equality. Goldsmith (1998) points out:

Perhaps the most startling discovery was the extent to which Spiritualism and the inception of woman's rights were intertwined. At a time when women had no power to achieve equal rights, they relied on the "other powers" provided by Spiritualism to sustain their efforts. Through the mouths of trance speakers came words of wisdom from long-dead seers, and from the spirits came the courage to go forward. (xiii-xiv)

The data gathered for this study indicates that Spiritualist women still find great comfort in the religion and enjoy an equality of the sexes still denied many other women who adhere to mainstream religions. Spiritualism boasts one of the highest percentages of female ministers in organized religion.³ This is due in part to the fact that historically, and even today, Spiritualism not only offers women a voice, but an opportunity to be heard on equal footing with men, as well as to participate commensurately in church-related leadership roles. In most Spiritualist organizations and many Spiritualist churches today, women are the undeniable leaders of the religion. Also, Spiritualism still is "intertwined" with many social issues of the day, offering an alternative view to and acceptance of marginal members of society, from all races, creeds, economic and social backgrounds, and sexual orientations.

Statistics on the Sexual Orientation of the Participants

Through interviews, onsite research, as well as discussions with a number of Spiritualist ministers, I encountered what seemed to be a higher than average percentage of male (and to a lesser degree, female) ordained ministers who are homosexual as compared to mainstream Christian denominations.⁴ The survey indicated 72% of the respondents to be heterosexual and 28% to be gay, lesbian or bisexual. Of this percent, 19% were male (gay or bisexual).

The sampling was rather limited, and because this question was not expanded upon adequately in the original questionnaire, these assumptions cannot be regarded as scientifically sound. But from the data I gathered which can be regarded as significant, it can be generally deduced, perhaps, that this trend can be loosely compared to that of women in the early days seeking out Spiritualism as an alternative to other mainstream religions: it offered no religious or spiritual restrictions based on gender or sex; hence, regarding the issue of sexual orientation, it is also a non-issue in relation to participating in and taking leadership roles in the church. (Leonard ^(b), 2005)

The idea that Spiritualists are "free thinkers" and place no moral judgment upon the actions or personal lives of other people (this is to be worked out between the individual and God once the person makes his/her transition to the spirit world), allows homosexuals a place in which to develop and nurture their spiritual selves. Spiritualism seems to offer this stratum of modern society, just as it did for women in Victorian times, an avenue in which to practice their religion freely and openly (as homosexuals) without fear of being judged; it allows homosexuals a haven in which to worship and practice their faith, regardless of their sexual orientation.⁵ Also, it is interesting to note that since the majority of ministers are women,

³ See Appendix A.

⁴ It is difficult to ascertain reliable statistics regarding percentages of homosexual ministers in mainstream Christian denominations because many churches condemn homosexuality so vehemently that a homosexual Christian minister cannot admit his/her homosexuality publicly. Conventional wisdom, however, would suggest that a cross-section of Christianity – which is a group or population – has roughly the same incidence of homosexuality as any other cross-section of society. The difference, however, is that a majority of gay-Christian ministers must suppress their homosexuality in order to participate in the religion; Spiritualism on the other hand embraces diversity and openly accepts homosexual ministers in its churches (which is reflected in its belief system which does not view homosexuality as sinful, but rather as another expression of love toward another human being).

and many of the male ministers I interviewed and spoke with were gay, it prompted me to hypothesize if “mediumship” work is somehow connected to a type of feminine energy (this is not to suggest the men are “feminine,” but that perhaps the spiritual aspect and vibratory energy needed to make spirit contact is somehow feminine in nature). This was explained to me in the following way by a heterosexual Spiritualist minister:

When you do this kind of work, we are all electromagnetic, and we all have male/female energy – which is not sexual. When you do mediumship, you use the “feminine” energy more than the “male” energy. Many straight men are uncomfortable with tapping into this female energy. Gay men are more comfortable tapping into it, so more male mediums tend to be “gay.” Straight men are often conditioned from childhood to deny their feminine energy-side, so they do not tap into it very much. Society tends to emphasize to men that they are not supposed to “feel,” for instance, “real men don’t cry.” You can’t be a medium without being able to feel deeply. (Brown, 2004 in Leonard ^(a), 2005)

Conclusive results of this assumption will have to await further research in the future, as data on this aspect was not adequately collected to form a theory in which to make a definitive deduction on the subject.

Statistics on the Age of the Participants

The age of the participants ranged from 35 to over 74 with only 3% indicating they were between the ages of “35-44” ; the highest percentage of respondents indicated they were between the ages of “55-64” (39%). The second largest percentage were grouped in the “65-74” age category (35%); and 16% of the subjects indicated they were between the ages of “45-54.” Five percent marked the category of “Over 74.” Interestingly, no subjects marked the “Under 25” or “25-34” categories.

This data is revealing in that it suggests a very mature group of subjects, which in itself, is not surprising. In general, Spiritualism is an aging religion, with the majority of mediums and ministers being elderly (see Leonard, 2005). The research for this paper uncovered that many of the subjects began studying towards ordination later in life, often as a second career choice after pursuing totally different professions earlier in their lives. This makes sense as only 12% of the respondents indicated they were “life-long” (cradle to grave) Spiritualists which means that a large percentage followed other religious traditions before settling on Spiritualism as their chosen belief system. It stands to reason that after finding the religion, then practicing the religion for a period long enough to decide to develop one’s mediumship, requires a bit of time. Once a decision was made to pursue ordination, this again adds to the length of education, making the aspiring minister older and more mature. Likely is the case in other mainstream religions, the aspiring minister grew up in the religion and the decision to pursue the ministry occurred earlier, perhaps soon after finishing high school.

The data revealed that a large majority of Spiritualist ministers do not actually receive the bulk

⁵ This aspect of modern Spiritualism intrigued me, so I inquired further to a number of Spiritualist ministers, both homosexual and heterosexual, as to the reasons for the attraction of gays to Spiritualism and vice versa. It was pointed out to me that this was not always the case. There was a time when Spiritualist mediums and ministers (who were gay or lesbian) had to hide their sexuality from the majority, fearing they would be asked to leave the movement. Spiritualism, however, does view issues from a more progressive point of view, and usually does precede everyday society in the general acceptance of current issues and controversies. Just as Spiritualism was on the cutting edge working towards the abolition of slavery in the 1850s, and embraced women and women’s rights at a time when society was fighting issues of equality with a vengeance, so does Spiritualism today embrace those searching honestly and purely for their own spiritual truth and place in society – regardless of their sexual orientation. (Leonard ^(b), 166)

of their income from being a Spiritualist minister. Only 1 in 9 subjects indicated that they are full-time Spiritualist ministers, deriving the bulk of their livelihood from their work in the ministry. So, out of 54 subjects, only 6 indicated that their work in the Spiritualist ministry was enough to fully support them in their lives. This is just over 11% of the total, which starkly contrasts to other mainstream denominations where the majority of ministers are supported fully (along with his/her spouse and children) by the church's congregation through tithing and donations by the parishioners and members; these ministers are often supplied with a parsonage and other perks such as gasoline money to visit the infirm and sick, in addition to supplemental money earned through officiating at weddings and funerals.

Statistics on the Religious and Spirituality Backgrounds of the Participants

The data in this study revealed a number of interesting clues as to why the respondents pursued Spiritualism and the ministry. A low percentage of the total number of subjects actually grew up with Spiritualism as their primary religion. This partially explains why the subjects had varied and often multiple religious experiences before deciding to follow Spiritualism as their chosen religion. The majority of the respondents converted to Spiritualism when they were well into middle-age, suggesting that they had difficulty finding a spiritual path that was satisfying and enriching to them. By deciding upon Spiritualism as a religion later in life, this then pushed back the average age of when they became certified mediums and subsequently made the decision to become ordained ministers.

Religious Backgrounds

Since only 12% of the respondents indicated that they were "lifelong" Spiritualists (with 88% indicating that they were not), it is not at all surprising that the subjects experienced a wide range of religious traditions while growing up and as adults. In fact, the majority indicated that they dabbled in several religions before settling down with Spiritualism. This phenomenon is common amongst Spiritualists and one I have labeled as "religion hopping."⁶

The majority of the ministers surveyed clearly indicated a number of religions they followed before becoming Spiritualists. The subjects were asked: "Before being ordained as a Spiritualist minister, what was your religious background?" They were then asked to list (according to the time period in their life) the religions they followed. These were categorized as "Early Childhood" (0-5; 6-12); "Teen Years" (13-15; 16-19); "Young Adulthood" (20-23; 24-26; 27-29); "Middle-Age" (30-35; 36-40; 41-45; 46-49); and "Senior Years" (50-59; 60-69; 70-79; 80-89; Over 90). Within these categories, the subjects marked accordingly their religious inclinations during the various time periods of their lives.

The results were compelling as the majority of the ministers (roughly 88%) indicated having experienced numerous religions and spiritual phases throughout their lives before embracing Spiritualism. Catholicism received the highest percentage, with 39% of the respondents indicating that at some point in their religious lives they had followed this religion. The second highest percentage (24%) indicated that they identified at sometime in their life with Methodism, and coming in third at 17% was the Baptist church. It is important to note that a few subjects indicated having embraced all three at some point in their religious lives, with more than several indicating even more variety in their responses, as many as five or six. In total, even though there were only 54 ministers in this study, they indicated on the survey 97 different belief systems, religions or denominations in their answers.

As delineated above, nearly 40% of the respondents indicated that at some point in their religious backgrounds, they formally followed Catholicism as a philosophy and religion. Among these subjects, a

⁶ This is where "a person will seek out a religion, try it for a while realizing that it does not offer them what they are looking for, then try another, and sometimes another, until they finally end up with one that they like, in these cases, embracing Spiritualism." (Leonard (a), 175)

large number were born Catholic and eventually converted to Spiritualism while many of the remainder subjects converted to Catholicism after following one or more different religious traditions before finally converting to Spiritualism.

The remaining 60% of the respondents indicated following at sometime during their lifetime a variety of religious traditions before becoming a Spiritualist. Within the protestant tradition (in addition to the 24% indicating being raised Methodist; 17% Baptist; and 13% Lutheran), other denominations, movements or traditions included: Amish, Mennonite, Pantheist, Buddhist, Wiccan, Salvation Army, Episcopalian, Christian Science, Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, Quaker, Greek Orthodox, Seventh Day Adventist, Judaism, and New Age/Metaphysical.⁷

For example, the subject identified as “II”⁸ indicated during his formative years he was a practicing Methodist; but in his early twenties became a Pantheist; then in his late twenties became an avowed atheist. In his early 30s, “II” embraced Buddhism (Yogic initially, then converted to Taoist Buddhism). He continued this philosophy until his late 50s then converted to Spiritualism, embracing this philosophy to the point of attending seminary and becoming an ordained Spiritualist minister in his sixties. This illustrates very succinctly the concept of “religion hopping” which I noticed throughout many of the respondents’ surveys while analyzing the data for this study.

This contrasts deeply to mainstream denominations that have generations of families attending the same church (see Loessin, 2004). Likely, a percentage of traditional Christian congregants and adherents may change churches, but usually it is from one Christian denomination to another. The Spiritualist ministers in this study repeatedly showed not only testing the waters of various Christian denominations by perhaps attending a different church, but often times following a completely different denomination, religion or spiritual tradition all together. The ministers in this study also indicated that at some point in their lives they were agnostic (5 subjects) and atheist (2 subjects) before becoming Spiritualists.⁹

In addition, the research shows that the subjects in this study were indeed a church-going group overall. When asked: “How regularly did you attend church while growing up?” 76% marked “weekly”; 6% indicated “monthly”; 13% marked “several times a year”; and only 5% indicated “once a year or less.” The act of going to church was definitely a part of the majority of the subjects’ lives during their formative years. This may serve to explain why the subjects tended to hop around and try different religions and belief systems because they had life-long experiences in being church-ed and either knew what they did not like with regards to religion, hence the need to search for a religion which more suited their spiritual needs; or they were very curious and wanted to experience a variety of belief systems before ultimately settling on Spiritualism. In other words, church was not a foreign concept to them and they felt comfortable embracing religion (in some cases, over and over again) which indicates that they were a largely “churchified” group of subjects.

Statistics on Years Subjects became Spiritualists

The years of formal affiliation of the subjects in Spiritualism as a religion ranged from early childhood to the participants’ senior years. The mean average of years since the subjects became practicing Spiritualists was “middle-age” (between the ages of 30 and 49). The number of “lifelong” Spiritualists (the criterion being that the person practiced Spiritualism since “early childhood” and/or their “teen years”) was 12%. Those practicing Spiritualism as young adults was 11% of the total; middle age was 70%

⁷ See Appendix B.

⁸ When the surveys were received, each subject’s survey was assigned a letter in the alphabet, A-Z. Once the first 26 were taken, double letters (e.g. aa or bb) were given for the next 26 subjects; triple letters were then assigned once these letters were used. The surveys were completely anonymous and the assigning of letters to each one was done randomly in the order they were received to insure complete anonymity of the subjects.

⁹ See Appendix B.

of the total; and senior years was 7% of the total.

These statistics further illustrate the fact that Spiritualism is an aging religion, with the majority of the participants being middle-aged or elderly. This helps to explain why the Spiritualist ministers in this study were much older when they received the “calling” to the ministry and became ordained ministers; the largest portion of these subjects was well into “middle-age” when they first embraced Spiritualism as their religion. With so few younger mediums deciding to become ordained ministers, waiting in the wings to take over the work of the older ones, Spiritualist mediumship and the ministry as we know it may eventually reach a state of extreme crisis if more younger people do not begin to pursue studies toward ordination.

The “Calling” and Preparation for the Ministry

Everyone who chooses to enroll in a seminary program (with the intention of becoming an ordained minister) does so for very personal reasons that involve a multitude of factors, not least of which is the personal relationship the person has with God – but which may also include familial, social, financial and even emotional considerations. This spiritual awakening can happen during adolescence or as a college student; or it can occur to someone much older who has worked in a completely unrelated career or profession for a number of years – nearly always, however, it involves a need to seek a deeper level of spiritual understanding and knowledge that comes from an internal vantage point to follow a vocation in the ministry.

The word “vocation” comes from the Latin verb *vocare*, which means “to call.” Vocation as “calling” has dominated how it is understood in religious contexts. For many who are considering being ordained, the idea of call is something literal: The voice of God speaks, directing the listener to a life of ministry. For others, the idea of call is figurative: It might come as a feeling, a kind of knowing, a crazy idea that won’t leave, a sense that this is the work they are meant to do in the world. Sometimes call is understood as the pattern that emerges in a string of events. Other times the voices calling belong to friends and family or to the words on the pages of a book. (Sentilles, 1)

As illustrated in the above paragraph, seminary students who decide to pursue a life in the ministry have a variety of influences which guide them in their decision. This applies to aspiring Spiritualist ministers, as well, but the “call” often is something that is experienced later in life (as will be shown in the research data) and usually takes the form of a “message” heard by the recipient. “Spiritualism has a specific approach to this subject and to God. The average individual expects to hear an audible voice and see a visible form – an experience that would enable him [or her] to believe that he [or she] has made contact with some unusual force.” (Burroughs, 91)

Mainstream Christianity – in the form of churches, seminaries, institutes, and universities – has always strived to instill a deep sense of commitment and dedication into its seminary students who hope to become ordained ministers by emphasizing the importance of being personally called by God to pursue the work of Jesus, the Christ. (See Manly, Bartels, and Ryle) A goodly percentage of Christian ministers who are raised in the religion, often attended the church of their parents. (Loessin, 21) This regular contact and exposure to their religious denomination aided these men and women to follow the next logical step in their spiritual development by seeking further to solidify their faith by answering a call to the ministry. The majority of Protestant denominations actively prepare men and women for the ministry through in-house programs that represent the particular belief system of the supervising organization.

In the religion of Spiritualism, this is also true, but a distinct difference between the two traditions is an overwhelming majority of Spiritualist ministers were not raised in the religion but converted as adults, and at a much later point in their life decided to pursue the ministry as a vocation. (Leonard ^(a), 175, 184)

In addition, the majority of Spiritualist ministers actually was raised in either a Protestant or Catholic household and attended church regularly (or somewhat regularly) while growing up, as mentioned earlier.¹⁰ However, at some point during their spiritual search, these individuals left the denomination or church of their childhood and early adult life and began to seek more deeply – often hopping from one religion to another – until finally happening upon the Gospel of Spiritualism which on some higher level resonated in them enough to not only become Spiritualists but also to embark upon the path of developing their mediumship and becoming ordained Spiritualist ministers.

Call to the Ministry

The survey asked the subjects if there indeed was a specific time in their lives when they first sensed a higher calling which led them into the pastoral ministry. Seventy-eight percent indicated “yes” and 20% marked “no.” Only 2% marked “uncertain.” Over half of the subjects (56%) indicated that this calling occurred over the age of 30; 9% indicated it occurred between the ages of 19-30; and 22% received a calling under the age of twelve. Thirteen percent indicated they received the calling during the bulk of their teen years, between the ages of 13-18.

When asked to select the most influential person used by Infinite Intelligence, God, the Creator, in this “call” experience, 24% of the respondents indicated “spirit guides” by writing this on the blank line marked “other.” Purposefully, I designed this study without specifically listing “spirit guides” in order to ascertain whether or not the ministers received a calling from Spirit directly. I was worried that by listing “spirit guides” as an option, it might unduly influence the respondents to select it because of the fact that mediumship is such a central component of being an effective Spiritualist minister; it might have pressured them to select it because of what they perceive to be what might be considered the proper or usual way to receive the call to the ministry in Spiritualism. The results are telling in that without having the option explicitly given to them, nearly a quarter of the respondents indicated that they did receive a calling from Spirit (most likely in the form of a clairvoyant, clairsentient, or clairsaudient message), which confirms the notion expressed by Burroughs (1962) that a portion of Spiritualists do receive a direct calling from Spirit which prompts them to pursue studies towards becoming a minister.

Not surprising, no respondents chose “Camp Staff/Instructor” or “Other Church Member” as being the single most influential person in their call to the ministry. Since all of the subjects were converts to Spiritualism, and most of them were not raised in the religion, it stands to reason that other influences affected their decision, unrelated to a church-rooted person. In contrast, Loessin (2004, p. 92) reported in a similar study of Christian clergy that 50% of respondents reported that their pastor or minister was the most influential person in their decision to pursue the ministry. In this study, only 35% of the respondents indicated “Pastor/Minister” as the single most influential person who influenced them. Again, this suggests that Spiritualist seminary students did not have the same spiritual support network regarding their religion that their Christian counterparts had.

In the section asking the respondents to mark all categories that apply to their situation regarding general influence in their decision to pursue seminary studies, I did include “Spirit Guide(s)” as an option. This received nearly the most selections of any other category with 56% of the respondents marking this category; “Own mediumship development” received the most with 57%. The category of “other church or staff member” received the lowest markings with only 4% of the respondents choosing this option. The categories and their percentages are as follows:

¹⁰ See Leonard (a), 175.

General Influences in the Call to Ministry¹¹

30% Visiting a camp/church	28% Receiving a message at church
15% Spiritualist home/parents	56% Spirit guide(s)
37% Counsel of a Spiritualist minister	20% Family member
30% Attending a home circle	17% Friend(s)
30% Attending a séance/healing circle	33% Pastor/minister
57% Own mediumship development	4% Other church or staff member
44% Development teacher	19% Seminary teacher/instructor
	22% Other (please specify) ¹²

Although a pastor or minister was not the most influential variable in a student's decision to pursue the ministry, 33% of the respondents did indicate that a clergy person did have some influence in their overall decision.

When asked to whom God led the respondent to for assistance, or who was helpful to the respondent in clarifying or interpreting the "call" experience, 69% indicated their Spiritualist minister, which is nearly twice the percentage indicated in the earlier data where only 35% indicated that the single most influential person used by God in their call to the ministry was their pastor/minister. Once the subjects received the call to the ministry, it was their pastors who assisted them in interpreting this and counseling them on how to proceed.

Fifty-nine percent of the subjects indicated "development teacher" as the second most important person used in clarifying or interpreting this call experience. This is related to a student's need to hone his/her mediumship gifts in order to become an effective minister. It stands to reason that the development teacher the student chooses to work with during his/her entire study period is the most influential person for the student throughout the duration of his/her seminary experience. The development teacher works closely with the student, assisting, critiquing, and guiding him/her in mediumship development. (Leonard ^(d), 56) At the beginning of their call to the ministry, ensconced in the program fully, it is not surprising that students view their development teacher (59%), Spiritualist minister (69%), their seminary teacher/instructor (20%), and their friends (20%) as being the ones to assist and help them in clarifying and interpreting this "call" experience.

Although the original call to the ministry was quite personal for many of the respondents, indicating that it came from Spirit directly, there were other factors that influenced them in their decision to act upon this call and who helped mentor them as they studied and proceeded. When asked what single factor (among a list of options) that is most important to the respondent in successfully working towards certification and training for the ministry, 44% indicated "personal discipline and dedication" as their primary choice. This reinforces prior research data results that Spiritualist seminary students do consider their mediumship abilities – and the personal work involved in this development – as the most important aspect of their ministerial training. (Leonard ^(d), 56) This suggests that without the proper discipline and dedication, the ministers felt they could not be effective ministers to do the work they were intended to do.

¹¹ The percentages were rounded up to the next number. Also, these percentages represent the percent of respondents who selected that particular category as they were instructed to choose as many that apply to their situation.

¹² In this section, the subjects indicated Spirit, spouses, non-Spiritualist minister, personal need to serve, physician, a reading from a medium, or a trauma that prompted the person to pursue the ministry.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was undertaken in part to determine whether Spiritualist ministers were raised in the religion or if they converted from another religion; in addition, another aim was to discover what reasons or motives they had to pursue Spiritualism and mediumship if, indeed, they had converted to the religion. Also, this study endeavored to find out what formal training the Spiritualist mediums were required to fulfill before becoming certified. Several research questions were examined to offer more in-depth analysis on the factors that relate to the ministers and their mediumship. All questions consisted of a content analysis approach using a questionnaire.

One research question posed and answered was – What types of religious backgrounds and upbringings did persons who converted to Spiritualism have (and the effects on them); and what type of person trains to become an ordained Spiritualist minister? The answers were more complex than anticipated. The subjects who converted to Spiritualism were predominantly raised in or came from Christian backgrounds; and these subjects were likely drawn to Spiritualism due to a lack of understanding and flexibility by their former churches. The majority of the subjects in the study were in fact converts to the religion; nearly all of the subjects had been raised in some type of religion while growing up. Of those, a high percentage of the respondents had practiced Christianity or had been exposed to some type of religious upbringing that followed a Christian denomination of a Catholic or Protestant tradition.

Interestingly, it was discovered that the majority of Spiritualist ministers – both men and women – had engaged in a phenomenon I labeled “religion hopping” before settling on Spiritualism as a religion. A number of the subjects experienced multiple belief systems, religions, and spiritual practices (throughout their lives) before decisively converting to Spiritualism. This phenomenon is a process related to an individual's desire to “find himself/herself;” hoping to experience a spiritual epiphany, of sorts, that would ultimately be a spiritual self-awakening that the individual would intuitively know to be “the one” religion he/she must follow.

A striking discovery was made regarding the ratio between men and women who are Spiritualist ministers – overwhelmingly, women outnumbered men (2 to 1). This is in stark contrast to mainstream religions where church elders are predominantly men, and where many fundamentalist religions prohibit women from holding any leadership positions and bar them from becoming ordained ministers, basing this prohibition on biblical teachings.

Spiritualism is certainly a religion that offers women complete equality in all facets of the movement. This trend has clear historical roots that date back to the beginning of the movement where women were at the forefront of the religion holding leadership and ministerial positions. Spiritualism attracted women then, as it does today, due to its egalitarian policies. Women are, and always have been, allowed to be full and equal members to men, and enjoy any and all facets of the religion on equal footing.

Also revealed in the fieldwork data was the finding that Spiritualism is a rapidly “graying religion.” This term is used to describe the current phenomenon of the statistics on aging within the religion. The majority of the participants were mature in age, with the youngest respondent being middle-aged. This is a troubling prospect for the religion as it is in danger of literally “dying out” within the next couple of decades unless an influx of young blood is infused into the movement to serve as the new torchbearers to carry the religion's banner on, and into the next century.

One possible reason for the recent decline in membership and lack of dedicated interest in the religion by more young people who choose to become Spiritualist ministers has to do with “choice” – there are so many more spiritually-based movements today than there were in the past that competition has become quite keen in attracting new members searching for a belief system outside the confines of mainstream religions. This influx of “choice” between religions has also taken its toll on the mainstream religions; people are following a number of belief systems that do not necessarily precipitate becoming a member of or attending a church on a regular basis. So, in many ways, Spiritualism has become a part of the “mainstream” over the years, adopting a system that is still on the fringes of the more traditional belief

systems but “churchified” enough to be considered somewhat mainstream. Many younger people currently prefer more freedom of choice and flexibility in their religious proclivities, choosing belief systems that offer even less structure and dogma than Spiritualism.

Spiritualism requires a certain degree of dedication and perseverance, and not mere dabbling. Ironically, it was for the same reasons that people initially developed Spiritualism as a religion that people today follow New Age ideas and practices – a desire for a less regimented, more flexible and open attitude toward spirituality. Because Spiritualism is organized and maintains principles and a specified set of beliefs and practices, perhaps young people today find it too constricting and prefer to have more spiritual freedom, even though many of the practices and beliefs overlap, and in essence, are the same. Spiritualist churches must work to devise a way to attract these “spirituality seekers” if they are to survive the current crisis of being a “graying religion.”

This ethno-religious study of Spiritualist ministers offers new insight into the religion, in general, and more so into the motivations and personal lives of the ministers themselves. Although Spiritualism is a rather new religion in comparison to its Christian-based cousins, it has a long and vibrant history that affords the researcher of religion a most fascinating area of exploration in which to pursue.

In the end, it is hoped that this study offers new insights and research data not previously found in the area of ordained Spiritualist ministers and their call to the ministry in the religion of Spiritualism. As evidenced in this paper, the call to the ministry is often assumed to be pastoral but can also include a variety of other areas that serve humanity, allowing ordained Spiritualist ministers to heed the call to the ministry in a way that uses their gifts to the best of their ability and to the greatest glory of God.

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Appendix A: Percentage of Female Clergy in Christian Denominations

Denomination	Total Clergy in 1994	% Female Clergy
American Baptist Churches	5758	12%
Assemblies of God	18,570	8%
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	5469	18%
Church of God (Anderson, IN)	2955	10%
Church of the Brethren	1163	12%
Church of the Nazarene	3413	11%
Episcopal Church	11,314	12%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	13,225	11%
Free Methodist Church	1878	1%
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	14,578	19%
Southern Baptist Convention	35,130	4%
Unitarian-Universalist Association	1236	30%
United Church of Christ	7297	25%
United Methodist Church	20,617	15%
Wesleyan Church	2190	11%

“According to a study done in the mid 1990’s by Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair Lummis and Patricia Chang there are 16,321 female clergy in 15 mainline and conservative Protestant denominations. This means that roughly 12 percent of clergy in those denominations are female. The distribution is not equal across denominations however. The more theologically liberal groups such as

the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ lead in the percent of their clergy who are female with 30 and 25 percent respectively.

Most theologically conservative groups in the list – the Southern Baptist Convention, the Free Methodist Church and the Assemblies of God all have less that 10 percent of their pastors being female.” [Retrieved on September 24, 2011 at http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/quick_question3.html]

Appendix B:

Table of Religions, Denominations, or Spiritual Traditions of Respondents

Religion, Denomination or Spiritual Tradition	Percentage of Subjects for each category	Number of Subjects (N=54) for each category
Amish	.02%	1
Mennonite	.02%	1
Catholicism	.39%	21
Christian (Protestant)	.15%	8
Baptist	.17%	9
Unity	.09%	5
Salvation Army	.02%	1
Methodist	.24%	13
Buddhism	.03%	2
Wiccan	.02%	1
Episcopalian	.06%	3
Lutheran	.13%	7
Christian Science	.04%	2
Presbyterianism	.02%	1
Native American	.02%	1
Disciples of Christ	.02%	1
Quakers	.02%	1
Greek Orthodox	.02%	1
Seventh Day Adventist	.02%	1
Jewish	.02%	1
New Age/Metaphysical	.06%	3
Searching	.09%	5
Pantheist	.02%	1
Atheist	.04%	2
Agnostic	.09%	5