

Spiritualism as a Religious Vocation: A Study of Seminary Students Working towards becoming Ordained

Todd Jay Leonard

Fukuoka University of Education

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Abstract

On March 31, 1848, two sisters in rural upstate New York, Katie and Maggie Fox, made contact with a disincarnate entity through a simple system of “raps” to which it responded in kind. This incident became known as the “Hydesville Rappings.” Once news spread about the rappings, this event forever changed the way people who were associated with the movement viewed religion, death, and spirit communication; it literally shook to the very core many people’s basic beliefs and ideas about the possibility of life after death. The Spiritualist movement eventually became the “religion” of Spiritualism as more and more people sought the counsel of mediums to make contact with loved ones who had crossed over to the other side. With this new religion came the prerequisite need for “ministers” who could lead and serve the growing legions of people who were embracing in droves this new religion. This study focuses upon those who have heard a divine calling and are pursuing ordination in the Gospel of Spiritualism. Through empirical research that included data collection, questionnaires, case-studies and interviews, this paper details the process and motives which prompted aspiring students to study toward becoming ordained Spiritualist ministers. The purpose of this study was to determine whether these future ministers were initially raised as Spiritualists or whether they converted from a more mainstream religion. What prompted them to want to serve the religion of Spiritualism as ordained ministers? This paper briefly outlines the history of Spiritualism, as well as addressing these questions.

Introduction

Spiritualism as a religion is unique because unlike other religious traditions, Modern Spiritualism bases its entire belief system on the idea that people do not die, bodies do—with the spirit of the person continuing on in another dimension, waiting patiently for a chance to make contact with those left behind. Spirit communication is at the center of Spiritualism with Spiritualists placing their belief in the hands of a medium’s ability to commune with entities that have passed over to the other side. In order to be accepted socially and by other organized religions, then, Spiritualist clergy were needed and hence had to be trained with some system of authorization required which sanctioned them to preside over life’s rituals that obliged some sort of legal recognition (*e.g.* the rites of marriage, christenings,¹ funerals, *etc*), as well as to pastor those who were following the religion as a “congregation.” Although all Spiritualist ministers

¹ Strictly speaking, Spiritualism does not use the term “christening” as it tends to have a very Christian meaning but instead prefers to use the term “dedication of a child” which has no specific religious connotation.

are, in effect, mediums, not all mediums are ministers. To solve this dilemma, an organized system had to be created to systematize the religion which would utilize ordained ministers; as more and more new Spiritualist associations began to form, allowing likeminded Spiritualists to meet and worship in the religion together, pastoral figures were needed as clergy.

From its earliest beginnings, Spiritualism was categorically against becoming “churchified” in the same way Christian denominations were formed and conducted. It prided itself as being different, encouraging members to be “free thinkers;” permitting its membership to follow personal truths from any religious tradition (and not merely following the stodgy belief systems that preached hell and damnation); and disavowing certain religious beliefs common in many mainstream Christian denominations while allowing a more flexible, if not liberal, interpretation of the Bible, even going as far as allowing women to serve as ministers in the Spiritualist clergy.

When Spiritualism first appeared as a religion, it appealed to a number of people who were exasperated with mainstream religion. This new religion offered believers not only alleged proof of life after death, but a belief system that incorporated the ideals and truths from a variety of the world’s religions. It also allowed women to play a prominent role in religion—a position most nearly always denied by the more fundamentalist-based religions of the day.

The fact that spirit communication was even remotely possible changed all prior held beliefs concerning entrenched and undisputed teachings of mainstream religions—the prospect of a new religion that was based on Natural Law and spirit communication, with undertones of a philosophy and science, and that which denied original sin, vicarious atonement, the physical resurrection of Jesus, as well as preaching positively about the redemption of all people no matter how sinful they were, appealed to a growing number of citizens who had grown tired of the fire and brimstone sermons of mainstream religions.

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.²

Perhaps the saying “old habits die hard” is true, as many newly converted adherents to the Spiritualist movement brought with them many of the ingrained ideas of their former Christian religious traditions, trying to fuse the belief systems of their childhood with that of the new religion. In essence, Spiritualists in the end did become “churchified” to a large extent even though it was their explicit desire not to do so. This had much to do with what people were used to in their religious upbringings and while some aspects could be viewed differently, it was just more comfortable and familiar for people to follow a system they knew and understood. This was of no matter, because the modest mediumship of the Fox sisters had exploded into a full-fledged religion called “Spiritualism.”

Gradually, as more and more people claimed to be connected to and able to communicate with the spirit world, self-proclaimed mediums were suddenly holding living room séances from coast to coast. From the very initial stages of the Spiritualist movement, however, self-enrichment sometimes became a motivating factor for a number of the mediums who soon began charging for their spiritual services. All of this served to muddle what was indeed genuine from what was mere fakery and deception.

Initially, the idea of this new religion was to be void of dogma, church tenets, creeds and doctrines.

² 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.

People were to be “free thinkers” accepting the truths from all religious traditions and sacred texts, allowing a free flowing of ideas and beliefs to transpire. Several independent Spiritualist-based organizations began cropping up, making it increasingly difficult to manage. Added to this is the fact that in the very early days, mediums were basically itinerant preachers who traveled from city to city to give tent demonstrations of mediumship via messages in the form of mental and physical phenomena.³ Since a majority of early Spiritualists had been Christian, many leaned toward organizing the movement using a Christian-model (*i.e.* churches, services, use of the Holy Bible, hymns, *etc.*).

Integral to Spiritualism, though, was 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.

The process that Spiritualist organizations require people to complete in order to become ordained ministers (*e.g.* as identified by existing Spiritualist associations today, most notably the *National Spiritualist Association of Churches* (NSAC), the *Indiana Association of Spiritualists* (IAOS), the *Southern Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp Meeting Association* (SCSCMA), or the *Universal Spiritualist Association* (USA)), vary in scope and effort in order to complete the program. For instance, some associations like the IAOS offer an actual seminary program that meets several times a year for weeklong classes and a number of times a year that have extended weekend classes that students are required to complete over a period of several years, incorporating fieldwork and community service in order to become ordained by the IAOS.⁴ Other organizations, such as the NSAC have a distance program called the “Morris Pratt Institute” that offers certain courses, as well as allowing their sanctioned churches to train and mentor students in the ministry (when the officiating clergy feels the student is ready, then he/she is ordained as a minister by that particular affiliated church).

In the cases of the aspiring ministers in this study⁵ who are studying to become ordained ministers, they are required to complete an extensive mediumship developmental program, as well as a battery of tests given in stages throughout the study course—both written and oral (in the form of evidential demonstrations of mediumship).

First, the novice medium must enroll in and successfully complete a specified number of classes related to Spiritualism, mediumship, and the ministry. Second, the aspiring minister must participate in message services, séances, and church services to demonstrate his/her platform work.⁶ This serves

³ Mental mediumship involves the gifts of prophecy, clairvoyance, clairsentience, clairaudience, clairgustance, psychometry, trance, inspirational speaking and writing, and spiritual healing. Physical mediumship includes materializations, transfiguration, direct voice, and *apports* (physical objects materializing from the ethers by spirit guides or loved ones for sitters).

⁴ The participants in this study were all enrolled in the Camp Chesterfield Spiritualist Seminary under the auspices of the *Indiana Association of Spiritualists* (IAOS).

⁵ A longer, more detailed version of this paper’s research first appeared in *The 2009 Proceedings of ASSR-SW* [See Leonard, 2009].

⁶ “Platform work” refers to the medium standing in front of the congregation for the purpose of giving messages from the spirit world to those in attendance. This term most likely has its roots in the old days when Spiritualists traveled the countryside as itinerant mediums and ministers, standing on a raised platform to do their work. This is a common phrase used by Spiritualists when referring to serving at a message service.

as a type of “apprenticeship” in that older, more seasoned mediums and ministers will often critique the novice’s work, style and ability, commenting on the presentation and accuracy of the message. In addition, the elder ministers will offer suggestions and advice on how to improve the aspiring minister’s ability to give messages more clearly and accurately, as well as to critique the student’s style and ability in giving sermons and service related prayers. Third, the novice medium must give messages in the form of genuine spirit communication as a type of evidential testing to a panel of sitters who are all certified mediums (the majority of whom are usually ordained ministers). This is to ensure that the aspiring minister is indeed making actual spirit contact. The members on the panel will judge the novice’s ability based on whether or not he/she is able to give messages that can be confirmed definitively by the panel (*e.g.* a name of a loved one in spirit and/or a description as well as a message that a panel member can recognize and concretely identify).

As a rule, this process takes at the very least several years to complete. During this period of time, the novice studies about Spiritualism, esoteric studies, in addition to developmental and unfoldment classes which serve to instruct the aspiring minister on how to develop not only his/her mediumship skills, but how to hone them. The student also learns practical aspects of mediumship involving outside tools that can aid them more readily in connecting them with spirit (*i.e.* astrology, tarot, numerology, *etc*), in addition to pastoral related classes which serve to prepare the student for the ministry. Throughout the course of their studies, aspiring ministers are required to take periodic written exams comprising the material they studied up to that point.⁷

During the developmental phase of mediumship, often novices are assigned a certified medium who acts as a mentor in guiding and advising the aspiring mediums. After successfully completing this course of study, the novices are assigned various duties to not only further their mediumship skills, but also to familiarize them with the workings of the church service and all other related aspects of being a Spiritualist medium. Throughout this tenure, the probationary medium is exposed to as many of the necessary elements of being a medium as possible, therefore gaining valuable experience in the process. Upon completion of the “apprenticeship” and testing, the novice medium is then formally allowed to practice as a Spiritualist medium, endorsed by the parent organization that certified him/her, complete with papers suitable for framing.

At this point in their mediumship, they can then decide if they wish to study further to become an ordained Spiritualist minister, which normally requires (in the case of a seminary program like the IAOS offers) a number of advanced classes and pastoral/minister related classes (in addition to sermon work, message and fieldwork) to become ordained ministers. Also, it must be noted that many who begin to study towards ordination often do not complete their studies once the rigors of what it takes to be an ordained minister is realized. 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.

The Research Study

The purpose of this research was to determine what social and religious influences, if any, were present in seminary students’ decisions to pursue ordination in the religion of Spiritualism. In addition, the study endeavored to learn the religious and/or spiritual backgrounds of the participants of this study, their attitudes toward religion and spiritual-based beliefs, and what role, if any, these played in their decision to begin the process of becoming Spiritualist ministers. The “call to the ministry” aspect was included in

⁷ The system described in this section follows closely the educational requirements outlined by the “Chesterfield Spiritualist Seminary,” the educational arm of the *Indiana Association of Spiritualists*.

the study to ascertain what factors were present which influenced the subjects to pursue the ministry in the Gospel of Spiritualism. A further intention of this study was to qualify the experiential components involved in the mediumship development portion of the calling.

A number of questions were set forth in a questionnaire to postulate these hypotheses. Specifically, the study was divided into seven parts: Personal Data, Religious/Spirituality Background, Seminary Studies/Mediumship Development, Call to the Ministry, Preparation for the Ministry, Future Tenure as a Spiritualist Minister, and Family Background.⁸ The study was conducted using seminary students enrolled in classes at the Chesterfield Spiritualist Seminary, Indiana. The only criterion was that the participants had the intention—at the time they participated in this study by completing the questionnaire—to pursue their studies until fruition of becoming an ordained Spiritualist Minister.

A majority of the subjects were selected through referral, meaning that once a core group of seminary students was selected through personal contacts, these people then distributed the questionnaire on to other seminary students 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 keep the study small in order to extrapolate data in a manageable manner. 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.

Descriptive Analysis of the Participants' Demographic Data

Eight percent of the participants indicated they were between the ages of “25-34”; 33% marked the category of “45-54”; and 58% of the respondents were between the ages of “55-64”. There were no subjects under the age of twenty-five or over the age of 65. Interestingly, no participant marked the category “35-44”, which was somewhat surprising in that conventional wisdom would seem to suggest that this would be an ideal time personally to start studies toward a higher degree. One possible explanation is that many of the participants who were older (55-64) indicated that they had one or more children; perhaps embarking upon an education program once the children are grown is more appealing than to pursue studies while

⁸ This questionnaire was adapted from one done by Loessin (2004) on the call to the Christian ministry.

trying to raise children. The age group “35-44” would be at a period in an average person’s life where familial obligations might be such that it would be difficult (time-wise or financially) to pursue new studies. This is all subjective, as there is no way to ascertain the reasons why this particular study had no people between the ages of “35-44”. The majority of the participants in this study were nearing or at retirement age, which could be indicative of having experienced a career, thus having fewer familial obligations which subsequently allowed them the freedom to pursue ministerial studies.

The gender of the participants was predominately female (83%) with a smaller percentage male (17%). This data is especially telling in that the majority of the subjects were female which is in direct contrast to mainstream Christian seminary programs.⁹ This is quite representative, however, of the religion of Spiritualism. More women have traditionally been mediums, as well as ordained ministers, throughout Spiritualism’s colorful and long history.

Spiritualism and spirit communication, first started by the young Fox sisters, 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). (Leonard, 165)¹⁰

Spiritualism played an important role in the inception of women’s rights, with Spiritualist female ministers and mediums campaigning aggressively and actively for women’s suffrage. (Goldsmith, xiii)

Another possible explanation for the predominance of women choosing to develop their mediumship and pursue ministerial studies is related to the male-female energy that is necessary when doing this type of clairvoyance work. Women tend to be more able to tap into the “female” energy, allowing them to develop their mediumship more easily and quickly (in most instances).

...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. (Brown, 2004)

Perhaps this helps to explain why gay men are often attracted to mediumship and Spiritualism as a religion; in most Spiritualist camps and churches, there are always a significant number of gay men who are not only mediums but also who are ordained ministers—something that is frowned upon categorically by the majority of mainstream Christian denominations. This is explained by Brown (2004):

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.

In a future study, it would be interesting to include more subjects and a section on sexual orientation to

⁹ In a research study done by Loessin (2004) on the call to ministry of Christian ministers, the percentage of male participants was roughly 84% with women at 16%—nearly opposite the male-female ratio in this study on Spiritualist seminary students.

¹⁰ This data correlates directly with an earlier, more expansive study I conducted between 2001 and 2004 on Spiritualism and mediumship. The data in that study placed women at 82% and men at 18%. (Leonard, 164)

delineate concretely this hypothesis that gay men are more likely to be mediums and Spiritualist ministers than straight men. No doubt, part of the attraction to Spiritualism by gay men and women, in general, is the religion's attitude toward salvation (*i.e.* "all souls are redeemable") and the idea that being homosexual is but one of the many varieties of people who inhabit God's earthly garden. There is no moral judgment made because Spiritualists are "free thinkers" who are often on the cutting edge of social acceptance of the downtrodden. The point being that well before mainstream society was ready to accept men and women as equals, Spiritualism gave women a voice in its churches and in society; Spiritualists also worked tirelessly for universal suffrage, the abolition of slavery, and fostered nonviolence as a way to mediate disagreements between nations. (NSAC, 2001)

The majority of the subjects indicated they came from middle/lower to middle class backgrounds and from smaller cities or towns. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents described their families as extended—large, including parents, grandparents and others. The subjects described their household while growing up to be both maternalistic (50%) and paternalistic (50%).

Research Data on the Religious and Spiritual Backgrounds of the Participants

One-hundred percent of the participants indicated that they were not "lifelong Spiritualists," all having either found the religion on their own or having converted from another religion as an adult. Eight percent of the respondents indicated that they converted to Spiritualism between the ages of "20-23"; 16% marked the category "41-45"; 34% converted between the ages of "46-49"; and 34% indicated that they became Spiritualists between the ages of "50-59".

Because none of the participants were raised in the religion of Spiritualism, they were instructed to list all religions or spiritual traditions they followed up to the point they converted to Spiritualism. With the exception of two respondents, all indicated that they had followed one or more religions prior to becoming Spiritualists. In a number of cases, several different traditions were listed. For example, *Subject B* listed Methodist, Presbyterian, Agnostic, Unitarian, and Methodist again before converting to Spiritualism in her late 50s. *Subject D* (aged 46-49) listed Baptist, Agnostic, New Age, Baptist again, New Age again, Unity, and then Spiritualism. Roughly 70% of the participants had multiple experiences in a variety of denominations, including: Presbyterian, Methodist, Unitarian, Baptist, Church of God, Episcopalian, The Way Ministry, Catholic, Salvation Army, Congregationalist and Unity.

This phenomenon of "religion hopping" is common among Spiritualists in that the average "Spiritualist convert" tests the waters in a variety of religious and spiritual traditions before settling on following the tenets of Spiritualism. This trend also partially explains why the average age of Spiritualist seminary students tend to be much older; they most likely spent their younger years trying to find a tradition which resonated genuinely and deeply from within them, until they eventually happened upon the Gospel of Spiritualism.

Seventy percent of the respondents indicated that they attended church "weekly" while growing up which suggests that religion was an important part of their lives during their formative years. It was in adulthood that the majority of the subjects began experimenting with different denominations of Christianity and other spiritual traditions before finding Spiritualism and deciding to embrace this religion. *Subject H* stated as an addendum: "I was not a member of one religious organization. I went to every church in town until the age of 52 and then I became a Spiritualist."

Since Spiritualist churches are not so common in some regions of the United States, it is not surprising that the average age of the subjects who converted to Spiritualism was higher than what would normally be expected. Many had no exposure to mediumship or Spiritualism until a later time in their lives. Even after conversion, it is sometimes difficult for Spiritualists to find an active church in their area. *Subject L* related: "I attend the Episcopal Church of my teen years because there are no Spiritualist churches in my home state." Often, Spiritualist seminary students do not have the convenience of being near a Spiritualist

congregation, nor enjoy the same type of familial support or have the longtime exposure to the religion like their Christian seminary counterparts.

Seminary Studies/ Mediumship Development

Responses to the survey question which read, "Are you a certified medium?", 58% of the subjects indicated "no" with 42% indicating "yes." This seems to suggest that the majority of the students in this study are in the early stages of their seminary studies as the process at Chesterfield Spiritualist Seminary requires certification as "Medium Missionary" before being allowed to become an "Associate Minister" or an "Ordained Minister."

However, a related section was included for the subjects to circle all of the courses they had taken at the time of the survey. Unexpectedly, a very high percentage had taken numerous classes, but had not tested for the levels for which the classes pertained. This would suggest that the students surveyed may have some type of hesitation in pursuing formally the various levels through testing. In addition, students were asked in a later section of the survey to indicate what they experienced as the greatest potential barrier to initiating their studies towards becoming a Spiritualist minister and 50% of the subjects selected "lack of confidence in your mediumship abilities." This helps to explain why students may be reticent about testing because in order to test they must demonstrate a number of times their mediumship abilities in public.

Unlike an oral presentation in the form of a sermon where one can prepare and practice before preaching, connecting with Spirit in order to give messages from a platform to strangers, in a church, takes much courage and confidence. Perhaps students prefer to develop privately and in development classes before taking the plunge to do public platform work. There is no specific rule at Chesterfield Spiritualist Seminary that disallows students from taking as many courses as they want without testing. In theory, students could take every class offered before deciding to test at all. It is a personal decision to test, and once a student formally passes the "Medium Missionary" level, he/she would be expected to do regular platform work which is then critiqued by seasoned mediums and teachers. It may be the case where students put off testing until they feel securely connected in the mediumship aspect of their seminary studies.

When asked how many years the subjects expected it would take them—from start to finish—to complete their seminary studies, 25% indicated at least six years; 34% wrote five years; 16% thought it would take 2-3 years; and 25% were not sure how long it would take. This is directly related to the "part-time" component of the program in that the majority of the subjects are either fulltime employees or retired; there is not the same type of urgency to finish quickly as might be the case in Christian-based seminaries where the students fully expect to begin working as clergy upon completion of their studies and ordination into the ministry.

In fact, when asked the question: "Do you plan to derive the bulk of your livelihood from the ministry?", an astounding 92% of the respondents indicated "no." Of course, this very likely has a lot to do with the age of the seminary students since many of them are in their 50s and 60s. Realistically, since the majority are more mature in age, they are most likely past the age of wanting or needing another fulltime career, so pursuing studies toward becoming a minister perhaps is not so much for the purpose of having a new "profession" as much as to achieve a personal accomplishment and goal. A number of subjects expounded upon this question by adding some interesting plans to serve in the Spiritualist ministry:

Subject D: "Working as a guest speaker/medium at area churches."

Subject E: "Visiting pastor/assistant; pastor at a local church; teaching, speaking, writing; healing, counseling and assisting others; offering readings to people."

Subject F: "Visiting pastor or maybe bringing my message to people through healing and writing."

Subject G: “By letting people in my daily life take comfort from me sharing with them that life never stops.”

Subject J: “Giving readings, messages, lectures, seminars, webpage teaching.”

Subject K: “I will go where needed—I’d like, though, to be a visiting minister.”

Subject L: “Visiting clergy; one of several; pastoral care; visitor at hospitals and hospices.”

Many ministers who complete the Chesterfield Spiritualist Seminary through ordination do teach on the faculty as “visiting” or “guest” teachers. Spiritualist churches are not as numerous as their Christian counterparts, so the likelihood of Spiritualist ministers immediately going out and finding a church to hire them—or attempting to start a church—is less likely due to the financial commitment it would take to initiate such an enterprise, not to mention the difficulty in building a congregation to support such a church. According to the results of the survey, the majority of the respondents is realistic about this fact and is happy to serve in collaboration with other established churches as “visiting” clergy and to serve in other ways, as mentioned above.

When trying to discern why the seminary students were willing to take so long to complete their studies, 58% of the respondents indicated that “fulltime work” was the main reason; 42% of the respondents marked “financial reasons”; 8% of the subjects checked “relationship/familial considerations; and 16% of the participants indicated “other” as the motivating reason for taking a longer time to finish their studies. No one marked the category “lack of personal commitment/motivation” as a reason.

When asked at what age the respondents were aware of their mediumistic gifts, the ages ranged from as young as four-years-old to forty-five years old. In fact, 25% of the respondents indicated they were forty-five years old when they first discovered their mediumship abilities. The majority, however, realized their gifts much earlier, between the ages of 4-16 (67%). The subjects had varied answers when asked: “What was your first experience with mediumship?”

Subject F: “I saw my joy guide,¹¹ Tom, as a very young child. He would tell me things that were going to happen. I also experienced what I called ‘prophetic dreaming’ my entire life—Spirit(s) would come to me in my dreams and give me information.”

Subject K: “Seeing little faces at an early age. Speaking with myself to get answers. At grade school, the teachers were always surrounded by yellow light.”

Subject L: “Attending readings beginning in young adulthood. What drew me to a commitment to Spiritualism was the death of my youngest sister. A friend suggested that I visit Camp [Chesterfield] as I was deeply grieving and not finding any resolution. My first experience was with a [reverend at Camp Chesterfield]. I sat down and she asked, “Who is Sara?” And I was hooked!”

Many of the subjects related personal stories involving loved ones on the other side, Spirit guides, and dreams as the catalysts in their early mediumship.

When asked, “How do you connect with Spirit on a daily basis?”, 100% of the respondents indicated prayer and meditation in their answers. This is not surprising considering the need for mediums to be centered and balanced when doing this type of work. Clearing the mind through meditation and

¹¹ Spiritualists believe that people have a band of guides that attend to them as “heavenly helpers.” The inner band consists of five guides including a doctor/teacher, master, chemist, protector (usually a Native American guide), and a joy guide. The joy guide often presents him/herself to the medium as a child. (Leonard, 319-321)

connecting to God through prayer are the two most important ways to prepare oneself when practicing the gift of mediumship.

It is no secret that many mainstream religious denominations look down upon Spiritualism as a pseudo religion because of the emphasis it places upon “spirit communication” in validating the continuity of life after death. This must be stressful for a seminary student of Spiritualism because of people who actively try to debunk mediumship and their religion as nonsense or creative fakery. I thought it would be interesting to learn how the seminary students personally respond to such criticism. Several respondents summarily dismissed such criticism as being born out of ignorance, or commented by writing “to each their own.” Others, however, offered very thoughtful and poignant answers to this question.

Subject F: “I just tell them that I can only speak from my own personal experience—what I know to be true. I also point out that the science of quantum physics has many laws that show that there is really no past or future—that all exists in the now.”

Subject H: “I realize not all have experienced Spirit. I just tell them that Jesus is my way-shower, and I work with the Light of God. I bless them and try to prove myself through my words, actions, and deeds.”

Subject J: “I do not push what I believe on them. They should pay me the same respect.”¹²

Subject L: “I quote the passages in the Bible that state ‘and your young men will dream dreams and your old men will prophesy.’ Also, the one that says: ‘Jesus said that you, too, can do all these things and more.’ I also cite I Corinthians 12: 8-11¹³ where it states that we are given manifestation of the Spirit, including the gifts of healing, gifts of prophecy, and the gift of distinguishing between spirits.”

Call to the Ministry

The respondents were asked to indicate whether or not there was a specific time in their lives when they sensed a higher calling which led them to pursue the ministry. Sixty-seven percent marked “yes”; 8% marked “no”; and 25% marked “uncertain”. Half of the subjects (50%) indicated that this calling occurred over the age of 30; 17% indicated it occurred between the ages of 19-30; and only 8% received a calling under the age of twelve. No one 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, 42% of the respondents indicated “spirit guides” by writing this on the blank line

¹² This attitude is very prevalent among Spiritualists as Spiritualism is not an evangelical or missionary religion, instead believing that people who are meant to find Spiritualism do so in “divine order.” Perhaps this is why Spiritualism has not fared as well as two of its cousins, Mormonism and Christian Science. All three are purely American-made and were eventually exported outside of the United States—only Spiritualism was not propagated via missionary and evangelical work. Also, Spiritualism did not have a cult-like personality to lead it like Joseph Smith (Mormonism) or Mary Baker-Eddy (Christian Science).

¹³ I Corinthians 12: 8-11: “For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit, to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another *divers* kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues; But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.” (*Holy Bible*, King James Version)

marked “other.” Purposefully, I designed this study without specifically listing “spirit guides” in order to ascertain whether or not the seminary students 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 half of the respondents indicated that they did receive a calling from Spirit (most likely in the form of a clairvoyant, clairsentient, or clairaudient message), which confirms the notion expressed by Burroughs (1962) that Spiritualists often do receive a direct calling from Spirit which prompts them to pursue studies towards becoming a minister.

Not surprising, no respondents chose “Pastor/Minister” or “Family Member” as being the single most influential person in their call to the ministry. Since all of the subjects were converts to Spiritualism, and none of them were raised in the religion, it stands to reason that other influences affected their decision, unrelated to a church pastor or family. 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. 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 put “Spirit guide(s)” as an option. This received the most selections of any other category with 75% of the respondents marking this category. The category of “other church or staff member” received the lowest markings with only 8% of the respondents choosing this option. The categories and their percentages are as follows:

General Influence in the Call to the Ministry	
67%	Visiting a Camp/Church
0%	Spiritualist home/parents
42%	Counsel of a Spiritualist Minister
58%	Attending a message service
50%	Attending a séance/healing circle
58%	Own mediumship development
50%	Development Teacher
34%	Receiving a message at church
75%	Spirit guide(s)
25%	Family member
34%	Friend(s)
25%	Pastor/Minister
8%	Other church staff member
25%	Seminary teacher/instructor
17%	Other (please specify) ¹⁴

¹⁴ 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.

Although a pastor or minister was not the most influential variable in a student's decision to pursue the ministry, 25% of the respondents did indicate that a clergyperson 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, 83% indicated their mediumship "development teacher." 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. At this point in their call to the ministry, ensconced in the program fully, it is not surprising that students view their development teachers (83%), Spiritualist minister (75%), and their seminary teacher/instructor (34%) 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 the majority 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 study and proceed within the Chesterfield Spiritualist Seminary. 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, 60% indicated "formal mentoring, tutoring, mediumship development" as their primary choice. This reinforces the prior research data results that Spiritualist seminary students do consider their mediumship abilities—and those who can assist them in this area—as the most important aspect of their ministerial training. This suggests that without the proper mediumship skills, students feel they cannot be effective ministers to do the work they were intended to do.

Conclusion

In point of fact, there were a number of surprising conclusions that came out of this research study. Prior assumptions regarding the age and gender of the participants were contrary to the reality of the current condition. Interestingly, the data was in direct contrast to similar research done with Christian clergy. Historically, women have always been the overriding force within the religion, assuming not only the role of medium but also teacher and pastor. This is also in direct contrast to many mainstream Christian denominations where women's roles are limited and females are sometimes banned from performing ministerial duties. This is no doubt an appealing aspect of Spiritualism that many women find attractive—the equality of the sexes—hence the overwhelming majority of seminary students being female.

The subjects' ages were on average older than previously assumed. With no respondent indicating they were "lifelong Spiritualists" (all converts to the religion) and with many of them learning about the religion late in life, it stands to reason that the majority of the participants would be more mature in age.

The candidness and honesty of the respondents' answers was refreshing and very much appreciated by this researcher. The rich details of the subjects' seminary studies and mediumship development offered unprecedented insight into the current situation regarding classes, mediumship development, and testing within the Chesterfield Spiritualist Seminary. In the majority of the cases, the participants indicated that they did a fair amount of "religion hopping" before finding Spiritualism as a religion that suited their needs; this attraction, often occurring late in their professional careers, was so strong that they were prompted to pursue studies in the ministry after receiving the "call" from Spirit directly.

One interesting outcome of the study dealt with the hesitation for the seminary students to proceed forward through testing formally, instead preferring to continue to take classes beyond the credits needed for passing the various levels. Perhaps a lack of confidence in their mediumship skills can partially explain

this phenomenon, as well as other extenuating factors including time and financial resources. It is quite evident, however, that this has nothing to do with a lack of motivation as all the participants seemed sincere and genuine in their desire to study toward becoming an ordained minister.

The fact that an overwhelming percentage of the subjects surveyed did not expect to receive the bulk of their livelihood after ordination in the ministry was surprising. However, upon further inspection of the current status of the religion in general (*i.e.* few ministers have their own churches), and when considering the maturity of the students, it suggests that the need to become ordained ministers is borne more from a desire to develop spiritually rather than for professional or financial security. In fact, many of the respondents indicated that they would prefer to be “visiting” clergy or assist in ways other than heading their own church.

The research data related to the “call to the ministry” revealed that it is a very personal process and one that takes many forms. While the majority of respondents did in fact indicate that they were directly called to serve by Spirit, there were a number of outside factors that played a role in their decision. Most notably, perhaps, is the fact that “spirit guides” were considered the most important influence used by God to lead the person into the ministry initially. Later, however, the students indicated that their development teachers, Spiritualist ministers, and seminary teachers played very significant roles in their seminary studies and in their calling to the Spiritualist ministry.

This study did have a variety of limitations. Perhaps a larger sampling of subjects would have been preferable in the end to get a more concrete understanding of the overall condition of seminary study currently taking place in Chesterfield Spiritualist Seminary. Also, a reordering of the sections that included more options might have proven more effective in ascertaining more definitively how the respondents regard these somewhat abstract and potentially confusing options. It would have been interesting, as well, to have had the opportunity to interview personally a number of the subjects to further elaborate on areas that needed further explanation regarding their answers and selections on the questionnaire.

In the end, it is hoped that this study offers new insight and research data not previously found in the area of seminary study and the 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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