

**Thriving as Young Leaders: Understanding the challenges to flourishing in new youth pastors**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study seeks to understand how the development of flourishing in the lives of young youth ministry leaders, evidenced by the presence of key flourishing building blocks (Everyday Happiness, Resilience, Thriving, Self-Integrity) to identify how youth ministry trainers (parachurch ministries and institutions of higher education) can empower young youth ministry leaders to thrive in the first stage of vocational ministry.

## **Research Question**

This research was conducted to better understand amazing young youth pastors, like my son Adam. My son was not a likely candidate to become a young pastor, let alone one who excelled in sharing the Gospel and producing God's Kingdom fruit. Adam knew the truth of the Gospel from childhood but did not surrender his life to Jesus until later in his senior year of high school, followed by an incredible "Jesus moment" his freshmen year at Biola University. Adam became passionate about the Gospel, interning at Mariners Church in Irvine, CA and later switching into the Christian Ministries major. When Adam confessed God was calling him to be a youth pastor, I was in disbelief. However, the evidence was there. I watched him preach the Gospel to large groups of middle school students after he joined the staff at Mariners JHM. I saw him take his first fulltime youth ministry job just before COVID "shut down the world", yet that ministry grew and saw kids come to salvation because Adam flourished despite the incredible challenges of that season of ministry. Tragically, Adam's ministry was cut short when he suddenly passed away from a brain aneurysm in June 2022. As I looked back on Adam's short but powerfully effective vocational youth ministry journey, I wanted to know what it was in Adam's development and training that set him up to flourish when so many languished under the demands of ministry.

The study aimed to understand the development of flourishing in the lives of young youth ministry leaders, evidenced by the presence of key flourishing building blocks assessed in the Flourishing in Ministry project: Everyday Happiness, Resilience, Thriving, and Self-Integrity.<sup>i</sup> [1] Through surveys and follow-up focus groups, this study sought to identify how young youth ministry leaders are developing these elements of flourishing and how youth ministry trainers (i.e. both parachurch ministries and institutions of higher education) can empower young youth ministry leaders to thrive in the first stage of vocational ministry.

The importance of this study truly lies in understanding the challenges that hinder flourishing are the same factors contributing to young leaders leaving their vocational ministry role. Barna Research's "State of Pastor Vol. 2" found younger pastors are less likely to say they're "very satisfied" with their current church (38%) compared to older pastors (50%) (p. 14), with 45% saying they have given "real, serious thought" to quitting within the last year (only 28% of older pastors have said this).<sup>ii</sup> [2] Barna summarizes, "It should act as a wake-up call that younger and emerging pastors – the Church's future leaders – seem to be the most vulnerable to the challenges of the vocation" (p. 17). Correlating with these statistics is the reality that younger pastors' well-being is an area of true struggle, "where just 7% of pastors under 45 are flourishing, compared to 21% of their older colleagues"<sup>iii</sup> [3]. This

may be partially due to the relationship struggles this age demographic experience who are beginning families amid the busyness of ministry.

The epidemic of leadership casualties in Christian organizations is so serious that leadership experts such as Robert Clinton suggest that only 30% of leaders finish “well”.<sup>iv</sup> [4] Glenn Packiam said, “We don’t just need more pastors. The need is to strengthen and help pastors become resilient”.<sup>v</sup> [5] This calls for churches to consider, What can churches do to help young pastors build spiritual fortitude and to support them during times of crisis? Taking this challenge one step further, What can a church, ministry training organizations and institutions of Christian higher education do to help a new youth pastor start right so that they are set up to flourish and thrive in ministry?

### **Literature Review**

The “Flourishing in Ministry” project began with Dr. Matt Bloom, and continues under the leadership of Dr. Chris Adams, as a center within the Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University. The “Flourishing in Ministry” project has conducted scientific research over the past 10 years with more than 20,000 ministry leaders to identify the foundational elements for flourishing. This research has also discovered the challenges that ministry leaders face because of the expectations, pressures and responsibilities of ministry leadership. The negative impact of these conditions is discussed in research from the Barna Group that indicates the younger the ministry leader, the greater their “struggling with their mental, physical and spiritual health... They also tend to feel less supported and more stressed, factors that put them in danger of burning out.”<sup>vi</sup> [6] From all research perspectives, vocational ministry is hard, of which the beginning stage can be the most difficult season of all to endure and grow through.

The Flourishing in Ministry study suggests pastors get into one of two trajectories, positive or negative, early in their ministry lives. “Within the first five to seven years, a pastor is likely to be either the flourishing trajectory or the languishing trajectory”.<sup>vii</sup> [7] This is a dire warning to be heeded as it appears, unknowingly, a young ministry leader can set upon a difficult path. Bloom continued to summarize, “What determines which of these trajectories a pastor falls into is whether a pastor develops and sustains an authentic pastoral identity and is thriving” (p.53). The reason for entering vocational ministry is directly related to the pastoral identity a ministry leader has and continues to develop over their ministry career. An authentic pastoral identity is one that matches a leader’s values, beliefs and calling.<sup>viii</sup> [8] Many practitioners state the first five years of ministry will weed out those who are

not in ministry for the right reasons; “most reliable studies estimate that number ranges from 1 percent to 16 percent”.<sup>ix</sup> [9] The “right reasons” is open to interpretation but seems to indicate a validation of a leader’s pastoral identity by those he or she is serving. In this way, a young ministry leader crafts his or her authentic pastoral identity as they serve in ministry, receiving feedback from those around them. In these early years, as the leader changes, the pastoral identity will grow more authentic, leading to a trajectory of flourishing, or be shown for its shortcomings, resulting in a trajectory of languishing until the ministry leader steps out of vocational ministry.<sup>x</sup> [10]

Prior research into the factors of flourishing demonstrated the true impact it has on a person’s overall mental and emotional health. “When we have happier days, weeks and months, we tend to make better decisions, have increased creativity, and perform at our best. We are also healthier, more resilient in the face of adversity and are more capable of building and maintaining positive relationships with others”.<sup>xi</sup> [11] However, research also found young leaders were struggling in developing these traits that contribute to their wellbeing, and that was before the full impact of the isolation caused by the COVID pandemic. Barna’s pre-pandemic research (2017) on the pastorhood found that younger pastors (<15 yrs) are lower in most wellbeing scores, except in their motivation to become a better leader. These pastors were found to be significantly lower in spiritual well-being, emotional/mental health, and physical wellbeing; “13% in this beginning stage feel emotionally or mentally exhausted... 61% say it is very difficult or somewhat difficult to invest in their own spiritual development”.<sup>xii</sup> [12]

Prior research has also demonstrated the importance of an Authentic Pastoral Identity to the development of a flourishing trajectory, “Pastoral identity is core to pastoral wellbeing”.<sup>xiii</sup> [13] This wellbeing is described as “People with strong and positive professional identities have an internal source of strength that helps them maintain a sense of appropriate balance and stay connected to work in positive way”.<sup>xiv</sup> [14] This pastoral identity is shaped over time as a ministry leader experiences good times that affirm his or her calling, as well endures challenging situations that refine their focus. The result is, with time, there comes a validation that the difficult path that is vocational ministry is a ministry leader’s true calling. Barna found “Those who have been in ministry for 30 years or longer are more confident of their fit than those who are newer to ministry”.<sup>xv</sup> [15] This is a logical finding as young leaders, who do not have experience on their side, would naturally lack this confidence as they approach new challenges.

A significant challenge that young ministry leaders were forced to face with little preparation was the impact of the COVID pandemic and its isolation and grief had upon all ministry leadership. Churches were challenged to meet emotional, physical, mental needs while still conducting worship services and discipleship groups using new technology many had never used before. The stress of adapting to such a challenge had not been experienced by the previous generations. Researcher Steven Sandage looked at studies of pastors' wellbeing after the pandemic and found

alarming rates of post-traumatic stress disorder–level symptoms. The levels of those trauma symptoms were higher than with post-deployment military personnel. Those studies actually fed into our level of concern and interest in recent years to see what we can do to try to work against the tide that seems to be developing”.<sup>xvi</sup> [16]

This should increase our concern for the wellbeing of young leaders who were just beginning their vocational ministry when the pandemic began.

Another challenge young leaders must endure is having their understanding of the ministry calling undermined by the expectations of others. “In their early years in ministry, many pastors find themselves facing strong expectations from members of their churches and their denominations [i.e. supervisors] to become the kind of pastors those people want”.<sup>xvii</sup> [17] The extent a young leader's ministry experiences are shaped by the expectations of others, and not in response to their calling, increases the likelihood the trajectory of languishing develops. Unmet expectations lead to young leaders being treated with contempt. These negative comments and complaints cause bring about a “death by 1000 papercuts”. The negative environment that the young leader may find him or herself leads to isolation.

People who are exposed to negative environments over long periods of time begin to show declines in flourishing... Instead of addressing their wellbeing, people often redouble their efforts at work, which typically makes things worse. They tend to isolate themselves from others, hunkering down in hopes of weathering the difficult period”.<sup>xviii</sup> [18]

The vision young leaders had of themselves thriving in ministry becomes a darker journey then they have been equipped to handle.

This is in part due to the fact young ministry leaders also have idealistic views of themselves and their ministry role. Prince Raney Rivers, senior pastor at Union Baptist Church, who studied post-pandemic burnout among African American Baptist pastors in North Carolina Rivers states, “younger clergy in particular, who have more of an activist mindset, may have felt led to lean into that activism, but that may not have been where their

congregations were ready to go at that time”.<sup>.xix</sup> [19] This speaks to the reality that vocational ministry is not an easy job as it requires a multitude of skills to fulfill a variety of different tasks and responsibilities. “Role complexity and role ambiguity may erode the happiness of clergy...”.<sup>.xx</sup> [20] This makes starting in a vocational pastoral role difficult as it is a steep learning curve. Younger pastors say the most difficult challenging aspects of being a pastor is juggling the demands of the job.<sup>.xxi</sup> [21] This leads to an internal struggle within the young ministry leader to question their calling. Rivers noted an increase cynicism in pastors younger than 40, “Maybe younger clergy are less patient with the time it takes to bring about change in a congregation. If you think you’re going to save the world in two years and everybody takes seven just to know what needs to be saved, that’s going to be a real challenge”.<sup>.xxii</sup> [22] The combination of complex job requirements and varying stakeholder expectations that counter the idealistic mindset of the young leader, impedes the pastoral identity of the young leader, challenging their flourishing trajectory.

Prior research has found additional challenges to the development of a flourishing trajectory. The negative environment that the young leader may find him or herself leads to isolation. In a 2021 Lifeway Research survey, pastors ages 18–44 were more likely than pastors over age 65 to agree that “the role of being a pastor is frequently overwhelming,” that “I frequently get irritated with people at the church,” and that their congregations have experienced conflict over politics.<sup>.xxiii</sup> [23] This isolation when combined with negative experiences in ministry lead to emotional, spiritual and physical burnout. Barna stated, “Our research shows that these early years can take an enormous toll on pastors... Pastors under 45 are struggling with their mental, physical and spiritual health to a far greater degree than are pastors over 45. They also tend to feel less supported and more stressed, factors that put them in danger of burning out”.<sup>.xxiv</sup> [24] The Fuller Youth Institute found in a study on ministry burnout that leaders ages 25-34 report the highest levels of burnout.<sup>.xxv</sup> [25] Burnout leads to young leaders making bad decisions, that may result in ethical or moral failure. Pastor Rivers said. “The more emotionally exhausted you are, the more vulnerable you become to making choices you would not make at healthier times and in a healthier frame of mind”.<sup>.xxvi</sup> [26] To summarize, research has demonstrated the challenges for young leaders are greater in the beginning stages of vocational ministry which prompted this new study to understand the development of a flourishing trajectory and the skills that youth ministry trainers and educators could establish a positive pastoral identity.

### **Overview of the Study:**

This study recruited young ministry leaders, defined as ages 19 to 32, with less than 6 years in fulltime vocational ministry, from a database of youth pastors from Download Youth Ministry (DYM), as they are usually the younger fulltime staff members serving in vocational ministry. DYM was selected as an appropriate sample pool due to the fact it is a nationally recognized youth ministry leader of content creation and has a monthly email subscription membership of over 25,000 youth pastors across North America and from multiple denominations. Twelve participants were recruited through an online email campaign to DYM's mailing list to be the Treatment Group.

This Treatment Group was compared to a Control Group of six young youth pastors that are being intentionally coached in ministry development through the Adam Keehn Foundation. This group was selected as the literature review indicated one of the primary factors contributing to a languishing trajectory in ministry was the absence of mentoring. In an interview with Chris Adams, current director of the study, he noted that the absence of mentors seemed to be one of the key factors that led to a pastor having negative, languishing trajectory for their vocational calling. Pastors require a sustainable ecosystem around them to thrive.<sup>xxvii</sup> [27] "It may be that younger pastors, who are establishing not only their ministry but also their marriage and family, have limited relational resources to invest in close friendships".<sup>xxviii</sup> [28] This may lead to younger pastors having less relational support networks to sustain them through times of ministry crisis. Therefore, the key differentiating factor between the two sample groups was intentional mentoring of the young ministry leader.

Participants from both groups took an anonymous online survey that gathered demographic information and measured key qualities related to Job Satisfaction, Wellbeing, Resilience, Thriving, and Authenticity. Wellbeing was measured through questions regarding both Happiness (everyday positive emotions) and Meaning (purposeful engagement). Only participants from the Treatment Group were invited to participate in Focus Group interviews to better understand the challenges young youth ministry leaders encounter when developing the elements of flourishing without intentional coaching.

### **Key Findings from the Survey**

The data revealed both groups had equal average years of vocational ministry experience (3.25 years). The Control Group (CG), differentiated by Intentional Coaching through Adam Keehn Foundation, consisted of 6 youth

leaders of which only 1 was female representation (17%). The Treatment Group (TG) comprised of 12 young leaders with a female representation of 25%. Although this was not a longitudinal study to map the trajectories of the participants, the study was able to find trends among the two sample groups based on years in vocational ministry.

### ***Differences in Job Satisfaction and Meaningful Engagement***

The online survey found the Treatment Group's (TG) Job Satisfaction scores, and Meaningful Engagement scores differed by gender and years of experience (see Table 1). Overall Satisfaction factors' score (out of 100 points possible) in the TG decreased from those with 1-2 yrs of ministry experience (84) compared to those with 3-6 yrs (80). This indicates a trending downward trajectory with experience for the TG as it was observed Satisfaction and Engagement scores decreasing with time. This may be caused by these young leaders not developing key practices to that lead to a flourishing trajectory.

Table 1: Treatment Group Average Job Satisfaction & Engagement Scores

Gender	Years of Ministry	Job Satisfaction Score	Engagement Score
Women		75	
Men		86	
	1 <sup>st</sup> 2 years of Ministry Experience	86	81
	3-6 years of Ministry Experience	81	78

*Note: all scores out of 100 points max*

The scores from the Control Group (CG) indicate an upward trending (i.e. flourishing) trajectory with years in vocational ministry experience (see Table 2). Interestingly, the Job Satisfaction score for the CG participants was the same regardless of years of vocational ministry service, but the more experienced participants in the CG identified a higher Meaningful Engagement score; thus, it can be interpreted that with experience, those receiving intentional coaching found their ministry experience to be increasingly meaningful form of engagement.

Table 2: Control Group Average Job Satisfaction & Engagement Scores

Years of Ministry	Job Satisfaction Score	Engagement Score
1 <sup>st</sup> 2 years of Ministry Experience	83	75
3-6 years of Ministry Experience	83	92

*Note: all scores out of 100 points max*



Overall, the Meaningful Engagement scores increased in the oldest set of the CG (+17%), while it declined in the oldest set of the TG (- 3%); this is statistically significant at the .01 level. While those in the TG with 1-2 years of ministry experience had higher Job Satisfaction factors' scores than their CG counterparts (+3%); this situation did not hold true in those with more experience in the TG. It is important to point out this was the only category where TG 1-2 year participants were higher than CG 1-2 year participants. It was also noted that for both groups, Job satisfaction directly related to engagement in meaningful work (in the TG: 10 or 12 respondents had matching scores for satisfaction and engagement, while in the CG: only 1 of 6 had a lower engagement score than satisfaction score). This is something to be studied more in depth in a follow up study.

### ***Differences related to Dimensions of Flourishing***

Contra Group (CG) participants were ahead in average scores for every dimension of Flourishing: Daily Wellbeing, Resilience, Authenticity, Thriving. While overall Well-Being Factors' scores of the CG (76) were on average 9% higher compared to the Treatment Group (TG) scores (67); CG 1-2 year participants were a full 15% ahead of their TG counterparts, which is statically significant at the .05 level. Resilience Factors' score similarly were on average slightly higher, 5% increase, for the CG (84) compared to the TG (79), with the CG 1-2 year participants were 8% ahead of TG counterparts. The same trend was seen in Thriving factors with a 6% increase in the CG (67) compared to TG (60), with CG 1-2 year participants 7% ahead of TG counterparts. Lastly the Authenticity Factors' score for the CG (75) was slightly higher compared to TG (70), with the CG 1-2 year participants again 8% ahead of TG counterparts. This pattern of the CG 1-2 participants having higher average scores then their TG counterparts was only statistically significant for the Daily Wellbeing factor. However, when this observation is coupled with the CG 1-2 year participants' consistently higher scores in the other dimensions of flourishing (as seen in Table 3), it demonstrates these participants with intentional coaching are trending as flourishing from the beginning of their vocational ministry.

Table 3: Comparison of Dimension of Flourishing Scores between participants: CG v. TG

Dimension of Flourishing	CG (1-2 yrs)	TG (1-2 yrs)	Diff % CG:TG	CG (3-6 yrs)	TG (3-6 yrs)	Diff % CG:TG
Daily Wellbeing	82	66	16%*	79	69	10%
Resilience	88	80	8%	81	79	2%
Thriving	67	59	8%	67	61	6%
Authenticity	83	75	8%	67	67	0

*Note: all scores out of 100 points max*

*\* Statistically significant at .05 level*

When comparing the differences in scores between the CG & TG 3-6 year participants, the CG participants scored higher in every dimension of flourishing except Authenticity, which was essentially the same score (see Table 3). However, it was also noted in each of these categories the CG 3-6 participants scores decreased yet remained higher than the TG 3-6 year participants. The scores in the various dimensions of flourishing of the TG participants regardless of years in vocational ministry were essentially the same score. Neither of these findings was shown to have statistical significance but suggests a need for more research to understand why the drop for this in these categories as ministry experience increases. As well, the factors related to Thriving were low for both groups which should be addressed in future research.

To summarize, key discoveries from the anonymous survey were Job Satisfaction and Meaningful Engagement decreased in the Treatment Group over the years in vocational ministries, while Engagement increased significantly in the Control Group as the leaders emerged from the first stage of vocational ministry. Dimensions of flourishing were scored higher in the Control Group than the Treatment Group but was only statically significant in factors of Daily Wellbeing. If the Treatment Group's flourishing scores were given as an academic grade, they would earn a C-, not meeting expectations, with especially low scores regarding Daily Wellbeing and Thriving. This provided the impetus to interview the Treatment Group participants regarding specific challenges to the development of an Authentic Pastoral Identity as prior research has demonstrated this directly relates to a sense of Daily Wellbeing and Thriving.

### **Key Findings from the Focus Group Interviews**

Three Focus Group interviews were conducted to better understand the challenges the participants in the Treatment Group (TG) face in the development of an Authentic Pastoral Identity and what methods they have been equipped with to overcome these challenges. Six members of the TG accepted the invitation for a follow-up interview; this allowed for intimate interviews in which participants could easily share of their vocational journeys and respond to the experiences of each other. Three distinct categories of discussion developed in each interview. These themes will be discussed with a sampling of quotes from each interview. The anonymity of each participant is protected by the simple designation of their Group number and position in the discussion.

## **Authentic Pastoral Identity is connected to a Calling matching ministry experience**

This research project sought to understand how a young ministry leaders develop a flourishing trajectory in vocational ministry. The dimensions of Flourishing have been connected to an Authentic Pastoral Identity.

Therefore, to understand the development of a young ministry leader's Authentic Pastoral identity, Focus Group participants were asked about what motivated them to seek this type of work, their "calling". The first factor that motivated a young leader to pursue vocational ministry was meaningful experiences in ministry as a volunteer.

I found myself just kind of longing for the ability to walk with people also in the joys and celebrations that come with being in life and community together... I participated in mission trips in 2019, 2018 to Malawi, Africa, and got to interact with people... something that just like pulled on my heartstrings to just want to be a part of intentional community, that sought to be together in order to worship God (Participant 1a)

I started to get really involved in my college ministry. I took on a lot of leadership roles, and part of that meant discipling some of my peers and younger girls. I absolutely fell in love with that—being able to walk alongside someone, or even just a step ahead of them, in their spiritual journey... So, I started volunteering with students, and I just love where they are at, transitionally. (Participant 2b)

When I was a junior in high school, I was trying to think through what I wanted to do in the future. I had written out this list of all these things that were the most important to me—things that I wanted to do. And it just felt kinda like a lightbulb moment from God one day, like, "Go into ministry." So, I started volunteering with youth at the church I was already a part of, and that carried on through college. I had different internships with middle school and high school because I was very set on being with older kids. But God changed my heart to be with middle schoolers as well, and I love them now—they're so great! (Participant 3a)

These meaningful experiences were coupled with the input of mentors who provided guidance concerning the path ahead. Participants reported "through the conversation with mentors and pastors and other people, I just really felt God saying, 'Hey, like ministry is the thing, like vocational ministry is the thing'" (Participant 1a's comments summarized many expressions). These conversations provided affirmation of the calling into ministry. Other affirmations came through witnessed life change through their ministry efforts.

When I get to invest in students, whether it's having lunch with them, playing video games, or having deep conversations, those moments make up for all the time I spend sitting at my desk doing paperwork. The way I've seen my calling play out—and how it's been confirmed in my life—is through tangible relationships that give evidence to the ministry. (Participant 2a)

A lot of my motivation was just seeing, even when I was in high school, how important and valuable it is to have people who are dedicated to pouring into a kid and their faith walk. I feel so blessed that I get to do that now with my students, and it's just been further reinforced the more years I'm in ministry. (Participant 3a)

The ministry journey was not always what a young leader pictured it would be as some did not begin their vocational pursuits towards ministry, however many of the participants were able to look back on their journey and see none of their experiences was wasted.

I studied HR, management, and entrepreneurship. I also had minors in hospitality and anthropology. I had a very broad, people-focused degree, and I've used every single part of it. I didn't expect that, but it's been a very delightful surprise. Ministry is intellectually challenging in ways I hadn't anticipated—you have to solve really big, complex problems quickly and creatively, and I love that. (Participant 2b)

The combination of meaningful ministry experiences and mentors speaking into their lives provided the motivation for these young leaders to begin to pursue vocational ministry; even though each participant's journey was unique, the calling was affirmed by both tangible fruit in ministry and the discovery that the “fit” of ministry is exactly what their vocational path has prepared them for. This does not mean the journey to vocational ministry would be easy, just that confirmation of the calling was present. One participant recounted the story of a conversation he had with his wife:

I was at a youth conference while I was doing ten hours a week at this church, just to kinda help the church out a little bit and to pay some of the bills while I was pursuing education. And I remember taking a few youth to a youth conference, and on the drive back, I turned to my wife and said, “I don't think I want to be a full-time youth pastor.” And she knew at that point that God was calling me into this, and she was like, “Well, I think you need to have that conversation with God and hash it out with Him.” (Participant 3b)

The difficult conversations with others provided the needed affirmation that their vocational calling was real and the beginning of an Authentic Pastoral Identity

### **Elements that are energizing produce an Authentic Pastoral Identity**

It was hypothesized that young ministry leaders who experienced positive ministry outcomes would be energized towards an Authentic Pastoral Identity, compared to those who faced continuous challenges and setbacks would not develop an Authentic Pastoral Identity and thus languish in vocational ministry. When participants were asked what energizes their vocational ministry efforts, the young leaders discussed relationships with students and teaching God's Word.

One-on-ones, getting to just sit down with a student one-on-one and getting to just share life with them (Participant 1a)

One of the groups I've been going through includes three girls—now two—and just that experience alone, of being able to sit down and have really hard but intentional conversations with them, has been a confirming thing for me. That's what drew me into ministry in the first place. (Participant 2b)

I love getting to teach. I love getting to see the lightbulb click on for students as they discover new ideas about our God and experience His truth through scripture. That is like massively energizing to me, to get to prepare a message and then share it and then watch them, like, absorb that and then apply it into their own lives ... When I feel like this actually matters, like I walk away from a Wednesday not just feeling discouraged, but feeling encouraged by whatever's happening. (Participant 1a)

I've had more one-on-ones with students this year and even just really within the last six months have had more opportunities to invest in students. And I'm not going to my lead pastor, who was my youth

pastor growing up and now is our lead pastor and my boss... *I actually have learned* and have started to develop those things and starting to actually feel like a real youth pastor. (Participant 3b)

I've gotten the chance to share my testimony—whether that's with a large group of students or just one-on-one through discipleship—and getting to speak my story into someone else's life and seeing them really take to that has been really encouraging for me. (Participant 3c)

Additional statements could have been provided from these young ministry leaders regarding God's faithfulness in providing for their financial needs or detailing how God is changing the lives of teenagers through their ministries, bearing fruit in salvations and baptisms. There was an energy present as these young leaders detailed the signs of confirmation regarding their Authentic Pastoral Identity. The positivity of the conversations made me press for the challenges these young leaders were facing.

### **Challenges to Authentic Pastoral Identity**

*Complexity of the job changes and increased responsibilities.* Most of the TG participants entered vocational youth ministry because of interactions with students or the spiritual passion to teach God's Word to the next generation; however, they soon found out how varied the job of a youth pastor is and the complexity of skills required to lead an effective ministry to students.

It's not all just running games and cracking jokes, but there's a lot behind the scenes that gets done in the position of a youth pastor. (Participant 3c)

Having to balance everything else as well, it was a big struggle for me. I just want to be engaged with these students, but then also, I need to deal with all the worship teams and lead those well, and organize the tech teams and do that well. (Participant 3b)

Full-time ministry is very different from what I actually thought it would be. I was surprised by how much management goes into ministry—just being a pastor in general. There's so much paperwork, managing trainings, overseeing leaders—the actual business side of ministry. Walking into full-time ministry, I was completely dumbfounded by how much of it was different from what I had imagined. (Participant 2a)

Even in areas that the young leaders felt was a high point of the job led to the discovery of new challenges, i.e. the development of significant relationships can take more time than it did at first when building relationships was the only responsibility.

For myself, I've had to come to realize, man, it takes at least three years to build some of these relationships with some of the students. (Participant 3b)

When a young leader experiences complex challenges, it is common for a young leader to feel inadequate.

Participant 1a related

Recently we've had a decrease in our attendance, and I think a lot of that is seasonal, fall sports, that kind of stuff... it's been a massive discouragement... I think sometimes, honestly, a lot of it is just internal. It's

just feeling like I'm not doing enough, or, you know, the enemy will speak lies like, "Man, you're just like so bad at your job," ... sometimes it can create some insecurity about the calling, for sure, especially if it comes hit after hit after hit, which it tends to do. There seems to be like seasons of highs and lows in ministry, so when you're in a low season, it can be really tempting to go, "Man, maybe I should just quit and I should go somewhere else and do something else,"

While each TG had a season of training, whether as an intern, a volunteer, or in school, nothing can fully prepare a young leader for all the fullness of responsibilities. This can challenge a young leaders Authentic Pastoral Identity as the ministry does not fit their expectations, nor fulfill the calling they pursued when entering vocational ministry.

*Negative Environment.* These critical thoughts are made worse by the judgmental comments of the students' parents.

Every now and then, there'll be a parent who kind of comes out and ... tries to give feedback on things that really turns into criticism. (Participant 1a)

And for me, you know, especially being young and, you know, still trying to learn, I've had some very big blunders ... [for example] And I didn't have anywhere near the same thought process a parent would have... So when it came to safety concerns—thinking about when school's starting, or when thinking about when to plan events and what all goes into that, and financially—all those decisions, I've had to learn all that stuff because of my age. And I've had to go through trial and error. (Participant 2a)

This lack of experience can become a negative environment through criticisms, becoming “death by a 1000 paper cuts”, causing the young leaders to question their calling:

I think for me, the times that I question, “Am I doing the right thing? Am I in the right position?” is just when a ball gets dropped or something isn't handled maybe to the level I'd like. (Participant 3b)

Like, I would be lying to say that there aren't times in my life and even in this year where I've literally gone, It would be just so much easier to just have a different job. I think there are times in my life where I definitely question my call and I question whether or not this is the right thing.  
(Participant 2a)

The negative environment often led a young leader to try to handle the challenges on their own, yet the isolation only exacerbated the problem as this became a season of working harder, by themselves, leading to defeated feelings; this is a recipe for the last challenge.

*Burnout.* One last challenge that was discussed by the young leaders was feeling burnout, confirming research from the Fuller Youth Institute that found young leaders are especially susceptible to.<sup>xxix</sup> [29] Participant 1a commented the negative impact of having multiple kids struggling at the same time, “takes an emotional drain on me”. Other participants mentioned the complexity of COVID as a source of burnout. “It was also during COVID, so it was just kinda crazy with everything that was going on. During that time, I felt like, ‘I don't know how to

continue on', because I was feeling really burnt out" (Participant 3a). The interviews with the Focus Group participants confirmed the findings of prior research as discussed previously: the challenges for young leaders are greater in the beginning stages of vocational ministry due to the complexity of the job, the negative environment from judgmental comments and the workload that leads to burnout.

### **Contributions to Overcoming the challenges to Authentic Pastoral Identity.**

The good news is these young ministry leaders recognize key steps they can take to overcome these challenging circumstances and develop a flourishing trajectory. These themes of help were summarized into the following categories.

*Talk to Others in a Community of Peers.* One of the key steps these young ministry leaders took to overcome the negative situations they found themselves in was to talk other people who would understand their circumstances.

Finding a community of youth pastors to gather with and share the highs and lows with is so important. The DYM Facebook page has been a massive source of that. It seems like anytime I'm going through something, I'll jump on that Facebook page, and I'll see five people who are going through that same thing. (Participant 1a)

Participant 2b noted to power of, "having a partner in ministry to go to and to be able to be like, Hey, you get it.

You know exactly what I'm talking about when I say, 'This sucks, You know what? I do get it. And let me pray with you or Here's some advice or Let me just sit with you'." That comment was echoed by Participant 3a,

It helped talking to other people about it. Like, the support that I needed or what needed to change... I have a lot of friends that I grew up with that are in ministry. So, being able to just discuss things with them and be encouraged by what's going on with them. I also have a youth pastor network that we meet with, and that is helpful to connect to other churches and see what's going on for them, what they're doing, and feeling like we're working as a team together in our area.

The skill of networking is a powerful resource that can provide the much-needed encouragement to "stay in the game" when the ministry environment is difficult. The reality that you are not alone in this struggle can show a young ministry leader the journey to an Authentic Pastoral Identity will have hardships to be overcome.

*Mentors.* Perhaps the single most impactful person to talk to is a mentor. The role of a mentor is different than the intentional coaching the Control Group (CG) received. A mentor was usually someone in the young ministry leader's life in a long-lasting relationship but was not necessarily equipped to help the young ministry leader navigate challenging dynamics. Most Treatment Group (TG) participants simply mentioned the encouragement

they received from their mentor, which cannot be underestimated in its importance, just simply noted to be different than intentional coaching.

My youth pastor that I had when I was in high school, now he's a senior pastor at another church. He is so willing to just always meet up for lunch and go grab lunch and just process and share with people who understand what it's like to be in this line of work and knows what it's like to work with teenagers and the challenges and the joys of youth ministry. That is a resource that can't be understated. (Participant 1a)

Participant 2a recognized the importance of “being able to go to people that have done it longer than I have, people that have a better idea of what's going on, and being able to go, Hey, I could really use your help right now, because I don't know what I'm doing”. This research project was not able to delve into the key differences between the intentional coaching the CG received, and the mentoring provided to TG. It is possible that in some cases the mentoring was intentional coaching. However, it was the encouragement from others, whether it being a community of peers or a mentor, that seemed to be the primary source of strength.

*Personal Spiritual Formation.* The last theme mentioned by young ministry leaders that helped them to overcome the negative challenges in ministry was their own personal time with God. When their own spiritual formation was neglected, it would not be long before they noticed signs of burnout. Therefore, they found the answer was to solidify the priority of spending time with Jesus and resting.

I need to be focusing on my own personal relationship with Christ... finding ways to worship outside of work ... creating space for my own personal relationship with Jesus is crucial. It's about more than just reading Scripture to prepare for a message or praying for a purpose in church meetings and gatherings. (Participant 1a)

I think when I feel like I'm operating on empty, that's when I know. When it feels hard to do ministry, when I'm drained, I think, “What the heck?” Then I realize I haven't spent any time in my own personal time with God. That definitely adds to it. I think for me, I'm someone who's very much like, “Go, go, go, do, do, do.” If I'm doing that without finding myself in my own community, like being in a Bible study or making sure that I'm making it a priority to go to my own small group or surrounding myself with people who are pouring into me, then I'm just working and caring for others. That's when I know I need to slow down and make those things a priority. (Participant 3a)

Recognizing my need for sacred space and time away from work. Like, my day off is technically Monday. Last year, I wasn't good at taking that day off. I'd send emails and newsletters all the time on Monday. But since the DYM conference, I've been challenged to rest and prioritize spending time with my wife. (Participant 3b)

I naturally kind of struggle to bounce back quickly. And so I think the biggest thing is just to pause and spend time with the Lord in personal and devotion time and make sure that these feelings of like, Wow, this is not going right, or This is not going well—is that really just an outflow of me being so busy I haven't been spending time with the Lord or not focusing on my personal call into a relationship with Him? (Participant 2b)

I shared multiple quotes to paint the full picture of this challenge and how young ministry leaders are responding to it. The time a young ministry leader spends abiding with Jesus and resting changes the perspective of the



hardship. I found interesting the response of Participant 2a, the time with Jesus has allowed him “to remember those [hard] moments, You know, these are tangible moments of you doing the Lord’s work and fruit being produced, and it is evident that He is very present, and He has blessed those situations. And He wouldn’t bless those situations if He didn’t ordain them in the first place”.

From these interviews three common themes of responses emerged. To summarize, the first theme was the discovery of their calling from meaningful ministry experiences as a younger volunteer. The second theme was while this calling was affirmed through spiritually energizing experiences with students and teaching God’s Word, they quickly realize the job of being a youth pastor is much more complex and filled with administrative roles. Some of the other challenges to a young ministry leader’s Authentic Pastoral Identity are the negative environment that develops from judgmental comments from others and the emotionally draining demands of ministry that lead to burnout. These negative experiences happen more in isolation; however, the elements of flourishing are going to stem from connecting with community (youth pastors’ network, mentors) and with God (spiritual disciplines).

### **Summary**

From the anonymous surveys it was demonstrated that the Control Group (CG), who received intentional coaching, differed in key aspects of flourishing from those in the Treatment Group (TG). First, Job Satisfaction and Meaningful Engagement scores decreased in the TG over the years in vocational ministries, while Engagement increased significantly in the CG as the leaders emerged from the first stage of vocational ministry. Secondly, dimensions of flourishing were scored higher in the CG than the TG but was only statically significant in factors of Daily Wellbeing. The findings were examined further in focus group interviews with TG participants. From those interviews, each TG young leader discovered their calling through meaningful ministry experiences in their formative years, usually as a volunteer, and that calling was affirmed through others, and from spiritually formative experiences with students and teaching God’s Word. However, they quickly realize the job of being a youth pastor is much more complex and filled with administrative roles, resulting in challenge dynamics of negative environments and burnout. The good news is many of the young leaders know the important steps they can take to overcome the challenges to the development of their Authentic Pastoral Identity, primarily being in community of like-minded ministry peers, input from mentors and spending time with God in spiritual disciplines.

## **Recommendations:**

Based on the findings in both the anonymous surveys and the focus groups, there are recommendations to implement for church, parachurch organizations and institutions of higher education.

### **For churches.**

The complexity of vocational youth ministry took many young leaders by surprise out of their energizing moments with students or teaching God's Word. While it would be unrealistic to expose a young ministry leader prior to their hiring to all dynamics of ministry, research has shown the importance providing new hires a Realistic Job Preview. You can read more about this research in my previous research article.<sup>xxx</sup> [30] A church needs to make sure every young leader has a Realistic Job Preview before being hired. This often will be as an internship, giving credence to why many churches hire from within their own internship or training programs. Whether this Realistic Job Preview is a formal program or not, there is a need to give young leader the exposure to the various roles of youth ministry to help them see the broadness of their expected responsibilities. Secondly, it would be prudent to create a team of vetted parents who can become advocates for the young leader as well as a trusted sounding board for planning. These Parent Advisory Team can operate as both protector and cheerleader for the young youth leader as he or she learns their way in the complex vocational ministry journey. By meeting regularly with the young leader for input and discussion, these parents will know the plans and purposes of youth programs, while not requiring the parents to become volunteers in the youth ministry; these parents are more "outward focused" towards other parents who may have uninformed negative impressions of the young leader. By providing this Parent Advisory Team, the young leader would be spared the negative environment and isolation he or she may feel at times.

### **Where Parachurch Organizations can help.**

There is a difference between mentoring and coaching that this article cannot fully discuss. To summarize, a mentor gives encouragement and perspective with occasional training, while intentional coaching often focuses on self-perceived needs and challenges; a coach develops new awareness, and skill sets to help the young leader overcome. This may bring encouragement but often results in an "Ah Ha" moment of clarity. Supervisors within the church can be mentors as often they have "walked in the shoes" of the young leader previously, but the conflict of interests may prevent authentic sharing from the young leader in fear of job reprimands. Therefore, parachurch organizations are in prime position to provide each new vocational ministry leader intentional

coaching, which is more than an older ministry leader providing encouragement. While churches may need to provide the resources to pay for intentional coaching, there are organizations that provide this level of coaching for free or reduced costs, such as the Adam Keehn Foundation, LEAD222 and the Intern Academy.<sup>xxxi</sup> [31]

### **For Institutions of Higher Educations (and potentially parachurch organizations).**

The primary role for institutions of higher education will be training, both in theory (classroom) and in practice (internships). The value of effective internships has been thoroughly discussed in other research. Where colleges and universities need to increase is in their teaching about practices that produces dimensions of Flourishing. This study demonstrated that young ministry leaders need training to increase factors that impact Daily Wellbeing and Thriving specifically. These should become areas of focus within the curriculum of ministry degrees as well as conferences to improve the practical skills of ministry. Three specific topics that seem especially relevant to the challenges discussed in the focus group interviews are, first, teaching young leaders in how to handle conflict and the negative comments of others. This skill includes both teaching about Emotional Intelligence (i.e. self-awareness as to how the conflict is affecting the young leader) and training in assertiveness as the age of young leaders makes them an “easy target” for frustrated parents and older leaders. Secondly, young leaders need to be trained to train and delegate key responsibilities to other volunteers. The idealistic mindset of young leaders often traps them to try to do all the work themselves, as if they have something to prove. Instead, young leaders need to see the real work of church leadership is to “equip others for works of service” (Ephesians 4:11-12). This new skill of delegation will allow young leaders to (third teaching focus) maintain in balance the aspects of ministry that energize them (i.e. student contact work) and the complex administrative tasks that only they can handle. It is important to teach young leaders to protect these energizing moments of ministry, to maximize space from them in their schedule so that most of their job are aspects that renew them and lead to flourishing.

### **Follow up study suggestions**

This study was a simple beginning to understand the development of flourishing within young youth pastors at the beginning of their vocational journey. The next steps of this research would be to perform a longitudinal study with a cohort of new, young youth pastors and then to this compare data to the Flourishing in Ministry Project’s findings. This two-pronged research effort would lead to a greater understanding of how young leaders develop a flourishing trajectory at the beginning of their vocational ministry.

This research also identified two occurrences that are worthy of greater analysis. First there needs to be more study of the connection between job satisfaction and meaningful engagement in work. What was the cause of low meaningful work for these young leaders? Is as simple as many younger leaders are relegated to menial tasks in associate roles? Secondly, research needs to be conducted to understand why low scores for Thriving existed for both groups, as well as a low score in Authenticity for both 3-6 year participants for both groups.

Flourishing has become a new buzz-topic in many research domains, a simple database search in an online library at any university will reveal this. However, flourishing in young leaders seems to be a topic that has not been thoroughly analyzed yet. It is the hope of this research to provide key next steps to take for churches, parachurch organizations and institutions of higher education, who are on the “front lines” of training young leaders, to insure more young youth pastors’ trajectory is flourishing.

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<sup>i</sup> Bloom, Matt (2019). *Flourishing in Ministry: How to cultivate clergy wellbeing* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield publishers), 2.

<sup>ii</sup> Barna Research (2024). *State of Pastor Vol. 2* (Barna Group publishing), 17.

<sup>iii</sup> Barna, *State of Pastor V. 2*, p.34

<sup>iv</sup> Clinton, Robert. (1988). *The making of a leader* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress), 156.

<sup>v</sup> Rohane, K. (2022). “Emptied Out”. *Christianity Today*, 66(4), 52.

<sup>vi</sup> Barna, *State of Pastor V. 2*, p.61

<sup>vii</sup> Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, p.53

<sup>viii</sup> Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, p. 13

<sup>ix</sup> Rohane, “Emptied Out”, p.46

<sup>x</sup> Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, p.57

<sup>xi</sup> Adams, C., Bloom, M. (2017) “Flourishing in Ministry: Wellbeing at Work in Helping Professions”. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 36(3), p254.

<sup>xii</sup> Barna Research (2017). *State of Pastor Vol.1* (Barna Group publishing), p. 17

<sup>xiii</sup> Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, p. xii

<sup>xiv</sup> Adams and Bloom, “Wellbeing at Work”, p.255

<sup>xv</sup> Barna, *State of Pastor V.1*, p. 102

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- <sup>xvi</sup> Evans, Elizabeth (2023). "The Clergy are not OK". The Christian Century, January, p. 42
- <sup>xvii</sup> Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry*, p. 68
- <sup>xviii</sup> Adams and Bloom, "Wellbeing at Work", p.255
- <sup>xix</sup> Rohane, "Emptied Out", p.46
- <sup>xx</sup> Adams and Bloom, "Wellbeing at Work", p.255
- <sup>xxi</sup> Barna, *State of Pastor V.1*, p.149
- <sup>xxii</sup> Rohane, "Emptied Out", p.46
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Rohane, "Emptied Out", p.46
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Barna, *State of Pastor V. 2*, p.61
- <sup>xxv</sup> Fuller Youth Institute (2025). "Youth Leader Burnout and Wellbeing". p 3
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Rohane, "Emptied Out", p.49
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Parkman, R., Erwich, R., & Vansanne, J. (2020). "Advice from the Apostle Paul to Pastors on How to Do Sustainable Ministry". *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*, 14(1), p. 80
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Barna, *State of Pastor V.1*, p. 39
- <sup>xxix</sup> Fuller Youth Institute. "Youth Leader Burnout", p. 3
- <sup>xxx</sup> See my article Keehn, D. (2015). Leveraging Internships: A Comparison of Ministry Internship Programs as Realistic Job Previews to Prepare for Vocational Ministry. *Journal of Youth Ministry*, 14(1), 54–77.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> A sample of such parachurch organizations that provide intentional coaching can be found at the following web domains: Adamkeehnfoundation.com; LEAD222.com; Internacademy.net