HOW LEADERS ARE SHAPED FOR TRANSITIONAL MINISTRY: AN EXPLORATION OF PASTORAL FORMATION AMONG US PRESBYTERIAN SHORT-TERM TRANSITIONAL PASTORS

BY

SHARI JACKSON MONSON

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Approval Signatures:

Committee Chair, Dr. Mark Lloyd Taylor	Date
Committee Member, Rev. Dr. Heidi Husted Armstrong	Date
Committee Member, Rev. Dr. David Hughes	Date
Program Director, Rev. Edward Donalson III, DMin	Date

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With Gratitude.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to all who answer the call to transitional leadership in the church.

ABSTRACT

HOW LEADERS ARE SHAPED FOR TRANSITIONAL MINISTRY: AN EXPLORATION OF PASTORAL FORMATION AMONG US PRESBYTERIAN SHORT-TERM TRANSITIONAL PASTORS

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This study focused on practical issues of pastoral formation among practitioners who lead short-term transitional ministry today. It utilized a survey tool and interviews to enhance the understanding of how the training and post-training practices of these pastors shaped their vocational ministry. Findings in this research aimed to report what draws, sustains, and supports pastors in this work.

This study listened to pastors with transitional ministry experience by inviting them to share feedback about their formation through training to discover what forms of support are most beneficial. From them this study aimed to uncover what might be helpful or encourage vocational sustainability.

Five research questions guided this study: (1) How likely are pastors with transitional ministry experience to seek calls as transitional pastors? (2) What draws leaders to transitional ministry in congregations? (3) How satisfied are they with the transitional ministry training? (4) What, if anything, would they change about training? (5) Which type of post-training support is most beneficial and what forms of support are difficult to find?

These questions are not easily answered. But church leaders want to know about pastors' lived experience because the church needs transitional pastors, and pastors with this specialization are increasingly hard to find.

Nearly 90 clergy from various Protestant traditions participated in the study. Two thirds were Presbyterian pastors. Feedback about transitional ministry training was generally positive. If one change were made it would be to include time during training to discuss with faculty points of practical application unique to the pastors' particular contexts. Findings on how to support pastors in this work focused on the impact of transitional ministry training; informal relationships with mentors, peers and friends; formal relationships with helping professionals such as leadership coaches; spiritual directors and facilitated peer groups; and the support desired from mid councils and national offices of the church.

The researcher's work with the data gathered from the survey and follow up interviews informed a storyline of short-term transitional ministry practice. It revealed that pastors come to transitional ministry for a variety of reasons, but they stay because of a sense of calling and a community of colleagues that support them in this work. They can feel like second-class citizens, especially when there is a gap in employment. New models of support are needed and should be explored.

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