

2024

Describing the Experiences of Fulfillment and Stress in Coptic Orthodox Priests

Dr. Martha Salama

Capella University, marthasalama13@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/jhstrp>



Part of the [Community-Based Research Commons](#), [Community Psychology Commons](#), [Counseling Commons](#), [Counseling Psychology Commons](#), [Health Psychology Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), [Multicultural Psychology Commons](#), and the [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)
Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Salama, Dr. Martha (2024) "Describing the Experiences of Fulfillment and Stress in Coptic Orthodox Priests," *Journal of Human Services: Training, Research, and Practice*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/jhstrp/vol10/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Human Services: Training, Research, and Practice* by an authorized editor of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

Describing the Experiences of Fulfillment and Stress in Coptic Orthodox Priests

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge my mentors that helped me along this journey.

Research Title: Describing the Experiences of Fulfillment and Stress in Coptic Orthodox Priests

Name: Dr. Martha Salama

Abstract

This qualitative study was conducted to understand how Coptic Orthodox priests describe their experiences of fulfillment and/or stress with their work. While many Christian leaders such as pastors, reverends, and clergy helping to serve their church members are represented in the literature, there is limited research on the roles and experiences of the Coptic Orthodox priesthood serving their communities. The Coptic church has been around for centuries, and the church has a history of religious persecution. The research question was “how do Coptic Orthodox priests describe their experiences of fulfillment and/or stress with their work?” The research methodology used in this study was generic qualitative inquiry. There were ten male Coptic Orthodox priests interviewed for this study. These participants were serving in the ministry for over two years. The primary data analysis used for this generic qualitative study was theoretical analysis. The findings of the study indicated that the priests were stressed with administrative responsibilities and helping their congregants. Overall, they felt fulfilled with their ministry because of their social support, self-care practice, and strong relationship with God. Recommendations for future research includes are those who were invited but did not accept the calling and specifically recruited priests who identified as burnt out and the daily experiences of priests’ wives and children.

Keywords

Coptic, congregation, fulfillment, Orthodox, priest, and stress

Background

The word “Copt” is derived from the Greek word “Aegyptus,” which means Egyptian (Belleau, 2015). Coptic people are the indigenous people of Egypt and the known descendants of the ancient Egyptians (Ibrahim, 2019). There are presently between six and 11 million Coptic people in Egypt and abroad (Tampio, 2017). The Coptic Orthodox church is one of the Oriental Orthodox churches based in Egypt and migrated to the United States in the late 60s. (Amin, 2020; Raemdonck, 2019). Today, there are over 200 Coptic Orthodox churches in the United States (Salama et al., 2019).

The church was originally founded on the teachings of Saint Mark, the writer of the second gospel in the New Testament, who introduced Christianity to Egypt in the 1st century (Gendi & Pinfari, 2020). Saint Mark was known to be the first pope of Alexandria. Through St. Mark, the Orthodox Christian faith was passed down through generations, including the Apostolic doctrines and style of worship (Amin, 2020). The Coptic church follows the teaching of the Holy Bible, the observance of the sacraments, canons of the Holy Scriptures, Orthodox creeds, teachings of the early church fathers, and the first three ecumenical councils (Shafeek, 2020).

Coptic Orthodox priests are supported differently than other denominations and have unique roles to fulfill coming into the ministry. The candidate needs to have a background in and a strong knowledge of theology (Orgen, 2014). Before becoming a priest, a potential candidate must get approval from the congregation, Bishop, and Pope for authorization to become ordained (Abdelsayed et al., 2013). When the candidate has the approval to become a priest, he must spend time in a monastery in Egypt to learn more about his priestly mission and theology (El-

Sayed et al., 2018). Once ordained by the Pope, the new priest must leave his previous career to serve full time as a priest to an assigned church (Abdelsayed et al., 2013). Priests must wear a long black cassock and a cross (Belleau, 2015). They must grow out their beard and wear the same clothing at all times (Tawfik, 2017).

A career in ministry, one spent serving humans spiritually, can provide job satisfaction and fulfillment. Fulfillment is defined as working towards a desire to be achieved and leads to positive psychological health and well-being (Heuvel et al., 2015). While some pastors get paid higher salaries, some church leaders do not focus on earning a high income (Nixon, 2016; Shooter, 2014). Their purpose to serve humans and God (Appelbaum et al., 2018). Also, church leaders focus on being involved with church members, religious activities, gleaning satisfaction from career and friends, and establishing healthy relationships (Anshel & Smith, 2014). Church leaders believe that religion and spirituality lead to long life, happiness, and a greater sense of belonging (Shooter, 2014). Studies also suggest that serving a community through religion and spirituality will create job satisfaction, joy, hope, forgiveness, and relief from death and fear (Young & Firmin, 2014). For example, Coptic priests enjoy promoting and teaching culture, theology, and the norms of the Egyptian community (Ruth, 2014). With these types of enjoyment, church leaders are happy to pass on what they know to their church members (Tunheim & DuChene, 2016). It is a sense of fulfillment and gratification to carry out God's commandments and rules of the church for the people, whether they are serving one denomination or many denominations (Barratt, 2014).

While religious leaders experience decisive and fulfilling moments in ministry, they also experience negativity (Shooter, 2014). Leading a congregation involves plenty of responsibilities, as already noted (Barton et al., 2014). Serving a large community without providing time for oneself can lead to a lower quality of life (Ruth, 2014). Ministry can cause moments of depression, fatigue, and stress (Prevost, 2016). Practicing self-care is needed to recuperate from the stress and excessive work spent each day (Bussing et al., 2017a). Dealing with stress, depression, and fatigue has caused Christian leaders to have health problems including cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Pring, 2015). It has also resulted in spiritual and emotional issues such as feeling God is not present in their lives or struggling to understand why tragedies happen (Williams et al., 2014). Many of the stress factors for service workers are caused by isolation, role overload, role conflict, or hardships in the workplace (Zellelew, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The general theory being used to understand the experiences of Coptic priests is the expectancy theory, which is an intellectual process theory of motivation (Vroom, 1964). This theory states that the individual makes decisions based on an evaluation of the strength of expected results of a determined behavior. Simply, people expect positive results based on their accomplishments and the benefits they earn from their achievement and fulfillment. The theory is based on three beliefs: expectancy, instrumentality, and valence (Simone, 2015). Expectancy of motivation is determined by how hard a person is working and the desire to achieve a specific goal. The ability to achieve a specific goal is driven by their talents, receiving help to accomplish a task, and having access to important information. A person believes a result will be achieved from the instrumentality of the performance. Valence refers to the emotional desire for the result

(Vroom, 1964). People are motivated when their achievement results in outstanding fulfillment, and outstanding fulfillment results in enjoyable bonuses (Houghton, 2014). However, if some individuals feel their expectations will not be fulfilled, they will have zero motivation (Lee, 2017).

Research Design

A generic qualitative research approach was implemented to capture the experiences of Coptic Orthodox priests. The method that was used to collect the data was face-to-face, semi-structured interviews.

Sample

The sampling strategy used in this study is a nonprobability sampling. The type of nonprobability sampling conducted was purposive sampling, which is when participants will be selected based on a predetermined set of characteristics (Barratt et al., 2014). For this study, the selection criterion was Coptic Orthodox priests who served full-time for at least two years.

Theoretical Orientation for the Study

The dominant theoretical groundwork for the study is expectancy theory (Vroom, 1946). Expectancy theory is an intellectual process theory of motivation. This theory states that individuals trust there are connections between the accomplishments they provide at work, the achievements that bring out from that accomplishment, and the benefits they earn from their achievement and fulfillment. The theory is based on three beliefs: expectancy, instrumentality, and valence (Simone, 2015). Expectancy is enhancing hard work will increase job performance. Instrumentality is the understanding that if a person will receive a reward if the event is successful. Valence refers to the emotional outcomes people hold (Vroom, 1964). People will be driven when they feel that worthy achievement will result in outstanding fulfillment and outstanding fulfillment will result in enjoyable bonuses. However, if an individual feels that his or her expectation is not going to happen then they will have zero motivation. Coptic Orthodox priests may enter the priesthood and are expecting to be motivated to serve their congregation to lead a Christian life (Houghton, 2014). Because they intellectually believe, they are expecting a desired achievement. (Kennedy, Allen, Hope, & James, 2014).

Data Analysis

The data analysis used for generic qualitative study was theoretical analysis (Percy et al., 2015). The theoretical analysis was guided by theory, and it was found in the research question. Therefore, the research question has determined concepts from theories on the topic under investigation. The interviews (data collection) were analyzed, and patterns that appeared from the data were coordinated under the proper pre-existing themes. New themes and patterns were developed during the interview. The theoretical analysis was appropriate for the study because the expectancy theory discovered predetermined themes. Themes from the literature that explain the expectancy theory are “expectation,” “satisfaction”, “enjoyment”, “happiness,” or

“motivation” (Vroom, 1964). Based on these categorical themes, this was investigated during the data analysis process (Percy et al., 2015).

Step by Step analysis:

1. Read and understand each participant’s interview. Interviews were revised again and underline or highlight sentences, terminology, or information that seem important bases on the predetermined themes and new themes.
2. For every part highlighted in the data, the question and themes were examined to see if they were relevant to the research question.
3. Excluded all displayed evidence that is not relevant to the research question; nonetheless, it should be stored for reevaluation forthcoming.
4. Each component of the data was given a code or an important word to described the information from the data.
5. Arranged the phrases that were associated and began to establish patterns.
6. Patterns that were relevant to a preceding theme are aligned as a group with other patterns that correlated with the theme in conjunction with explicit statements seized from the data (transcribed interviews) to analyze the pattern.
7. Patterns that did not correlate to previous themes were stored in a private folder for later use of references or examination. Steps 1-7 were conducted for all participants.
8. Patterns were taken and searched for development of overall themes. This protocol included connecting and assembling similar patterns into the preceding themes.
9. Once the data was evaluated, organize the themes to correlate with the evidence. The patterns are used to clear up the themes.

10. Look back at the patterns that did not correlate with the preceding groups and stand clear to new patterns and themes similar to the research topic and have appeared from the data analysis.
11. I drafted a concise analysis illustrating the outlook and item of each theme.
12. Every single pattern was required to be detailed and clarified by evidence from data (Percy et al., 2015).

Pre-Existing Themes

Main Theme: Expectations

Subtheme 1: Reliance On Past Observation. The priests had many expectations before they started the ministry, most based on direct observations. They learned this way because some of the priests explained there were priests in their family. They noticed how busy the priests were, and that they had no time on their hands. Priests stated, “I have priests in my family, so I saw how much work they had to do,” and “I’ve seen what the priests in my own family have gone through.”

Other priests did not have priests in their own family but were very involved with the congregation and church as they were growing up. Some were very close to their priests, and they noticed the responsibilities they had to deal with. Therefore, the priests in the interview learned from their upbringing and other people that priests deal with heavy responsibilities. Priests reported, “I saw how much my mentor, who is a priest, handled the amount of work,” and “as I was growing up, my priests were constantly busy, and I barely had the opportunity to see them, so I figured it would be like that with me.”

Subtheme 2: Becoming A Priest Would Be A Life-Changing Event. Another anticipated expectation was when a man becomes a priest, his life would change substantially. The priests knew it was an expectation to leave their careers, degrees, and lifestyles behind to become priests. Many had some concerns with their careers and ongoing changes that were happening. Priests said, “I was doing well in my pharmacy career...very lucrative...a lot of professional opportunities so I was concerned,” “I was an engineer in a big company...I had a good position and good money, so leaving my job was hard,” and “I just started my career in a big corporate company so I wasn’t prepared, and it was not the right timing.” Careers were very important because most of the priests first discussed where they were working and what degrees they earned. Most were making substantial money and had promising careers. The priesthood would have been a completely life-changing event. It was an uneasy feeling to face while considering the priesthood.

Because of the full commitment and devotion to the priesthood, they expected they might not have a great deal of time with their own families. The participants reported having seen other priests’ lack of time for themselves and their own families. It was an expectation that it would

happen in their careers, especially with priests working with a large congregation. Priests felt they were going to have to work harder to spend the extra time with their children and wives once they were ordained. Priests said, “I expected there was going to be commitment [to] making time for my family,” “it was going to be a matter of adjustment to spend time with my kids,” and “I felt it was going to be a burden for sure...ya know...with kids and school, and my wife and I working opposite schedules.” Some priests felt it was going to be a burden because they might not have been able to see their wives and children throughout the week. Usually, priests work weekends and work nights because that is when congregants are free from school and work.

Subtheme 3: Working With Congregants. The interviewees expected congregants to act like proper Christians, and that there would not be any problems bad enough to have to tell people how to act like a Christian. Priests stated, “I expected that church people would be honest and have integrity,” “I thought everybody was going to be on the same page” and “expecting everyone the same intention for the glory of God.” They thought people were going to understand the responsibilities, in terms of knowing they had to fast, pray, and learn the denomination; so, they expected their lives would be in the church. Coptic people were raised to listen to the priest like a father or a parent. Most of the priests knew every congregant had a journey, and they would help them throughout it, but many of the priests also expected that the congregants would keep their word and not be hypocrites. Therefore, the priests thought they would not have extreme problems with their congregants once they were ordained. Many priests knew there were going to be some challenges, but not as severe as what they experienced.

Subtheme 4: Daily Work Of Priest. While some priests had different expectations, others felt the priesthood was going to be an easy job. They thought it was going to be no different from their previous employment, such as dealing with customers. Priests have said, “I thought it was going to be easy,” “I thought it would be an eternal bliss,” and “I figured it would be a walk in the park.” Most priests felt their past careers were not as challenging in engineering, corporate companies, and pharmacy, so being a priest would be much easier. Many figured the work would be simple in terms of paying the bills and having good relationships with everyone.

Indeed, there were other expectations developed during the study located under additional themes. The other expectations happened after the priesthood started. Their feelings and responsibilities were different and unexpected compared to what it was like before the priesthood. There were both positive and negative feelings and experiences after the priesthood.

Main Theme: Motivation

Subtheme 1: Accept The Calling From God. Some participants reported that it was a calling from God to join the priesthood, and others felt the priesthood was something they were compelled to do. The main statements the priests mentioned were, “this is a calling,” “it felt like God was really calling,” “we felt God was telling us it was His call,” and “I realized God was calling me, so I submitted.”

All of the participants felt it was their destiny or path to become a priest by the spirit of God. They did not report being forced or obligated to join the priesthood. They decided on their own to join the priesthood. Even when they were confronted numerous times and felt pressured, it did not force them to join the priesthood. To be in the priesthood, they wanted to make sure it

was right for them and not a mistake. With their confidence and motivation, the priests finally accepted the nomination and felt it was God's calling. Therefore, they were motivated to fulfill the tasks and responsibilities in the priesthood.

Subtheme 2: Serving Other People. Serving in the church was a passion for many priests as they were growing up. Priests discussed the time spent involved in a church before the priesthood. Some were Sunday school teachers and administered Bible study classes. Others were chaperones for retreats and trips, were involved in extra circular activities, or were counselors for a camp. All priests were deacons and had a close relationship with the Coptic community. Approximately half of the participants explained how much they loved serving in a church, so they expected they would be looking forward to it.

When they became priests, they felt motivated to help their congregation. Priests have said, "I feel that I have responsibility for them," "I feel that I need to be a father to everyone," and "giving back to the church that taught me." Priests were motivated to help the congregation to experience God and to develop their spiritual lives. Many stated they wanted to be more than just priests but to become mentors, friends, and fathers. They knew it was not only the congregation they served but also different people with different backgrounds and denominations. They understood they were going to help people who needed to learn about God and to give insights on their problems.

Additional Theme 1: Journey to Becoming a Priest

Initial Invitation. All priests have stated that a person does not decide that he wants to be a priest as a career. They did not seek it out themselves or volunteered. Instead, they were approached. Priests have reported, "I was asked or invited to consider the priesthood," "I got the nomination for a few churches," and "it came with very little warning." The priests expressed they were asked several times, and the choice came to them. In addition, some churches got to have a vote. The votes vary between the congregation, priests, and bishops. For example, two priests were nominated because the church was seeking a priest to minister to the youth. The two priests were involved for many years with helping youth, and they were both nominated. Even if a man was nominated, sometimes the bishop decides which church he will serve. It may not necessarily be the church he is currently serving.

Additional Theme 2: Reactions Towards the Priesthood

Subtheme 1: Priest's Emotional Reactions. All participants had mixed reactions toward the invitation. Priests have reported, "I had anxiety," "it wasn't the best feeling," "I was afraid to consider," and "I would say there was a bit of tension between me and the priests wanting me to consider quickly." Approximately one-third of the priests stated that it was a frustrating process because they were continually being asked to consider the priesthood. Also, all priests said how they did not want it initially. Priests reported, "It didn't feel right at the time," "I ran away from it," "it was something that wasn't written on my mind," and "maybe they got the wrong person." Because it came with little warning, the participants felt they were being asked to leave their careers behind and join the priesthood.

Subtheme 2: Significant Others' Involvement (Wives, Children, Families). The priests had to make the decision for themselves, but the families were also a big component in the decision. The wife needed to approve the nomination first before the husband. One priest was celibate, so he did not have to consider a spouse for a decision. Most priests reported, "My wife was adamant," "my wife wasn't comfortable with the idea," and "my wife was confused and was asking a lot of questions." The wives had to take the time with their husbands to consider the priesthood because his life would affect his family. About half of the priests stated that they were eventually on board with the priesthood, but their wives were still ambivalent.

Priests also discussed how their families (parents, children, friends, etc.) reacted towards the priesthood. About one-third of the priests discussed, "my family was a bit disappointed," "our families have never had a member of ordained clergy in the family, so they were concerned," and "my family was not happy, there was a lot of tension." Families questioned how it would change their lives or if it was the right path. Some priests reported that they wanted to make sure their families were happy with the decision, so they continued to pray.

Additional Theme 3: Decision-Making Process

To consider their decision to join the priesthood, the participants took the time to fast and pray. Priests reported, "we took the next couple of months to really pray and fast," "prayer is what really guided me," and "I just prayed about it a lot and spent some time fasting." It took around two years for some priests until they made their decision, while others took around almost ten years before a decision was made. For some, it took so long because some priests wanted to work out their finances first. They had just had children, or they simply wanted to hold off on it for as long as they could. Because the priesthood is a commitment, the priests wanted to make sure it was the right time to be devoted.

As their decisions were still pending, about half of the priests stated they had their thoughts and opinions while considering the priesthood. Some reported, "I don't feel worthy enough to be a priest," "I looked at myself and compared myself to these spiritual giants," and "I did not think I was worthy to be in that position, so it was a tough balance." The journey to decide was a stressful experience for most of the priests. It was not a decision they could make overnight.

Additional Theme 4: Experience After Becoming A Priest

Subtheme 1: The Reality Of Responsibilities. As the priests began their ministry, they felt unexpected stress dealing with the number of responsibilities after becoming a priest. Priests discussed, "this is really difficult," "I don't have time to do much," "you're on duty...you're on call 24/7," "I did not think I would last," "it's a big responsibility," and "it could be daunting." Priests explained that it was not always easy. Some priests dealt with 40 families, while other priests had to deal with 400 families. It was a ministry where they had to communicate with people all week consistently. It was an unexpected occurrence that their schedules would be so busy. Then, they had to focus on their own families at home.

The overwhelming number of responsibilities has caused most priests to have negative feelings about not spending enough time to help or accomplish a task. Priests reported, "I felt

guilty for canceling appointments,” “I’ve been distracted by one problem and not focusing on the other,” and “I just feel inadequate.” In addition, priests reported other feelings such as being “very exhausted,” “I’m tired,” “I feel like I’ve been burnout,” “emotionally, it tires me more than I realize,” and “feeling frustrated.” All priests felt they were emotionally and physically tired. The high amount of work has had the participants feeling like they were not responsible enough to be in ministry and felt they needed to do a better job.

Subtheme 2: Types Of Responsibilities Priests Dealt With. Priests explained the type of administrative work they were responsible for in their day-to-day ministry. Priests reported they were responsible for performing baptisms, preparing sermons, announcements going out every week, marriage counseling, initiating marriages, taking care of financial needs, taking care of people, and praying liturgy. The priests stated their tasks were not always simple because it took up time out their day. Priests stated, “it can take up to six hours counseling a marital couple,” “I had to go and pick up a kid who shoplifted because he did not want to call his parents,” and “one person I personally drove 4 times to a rehab facility.”

Additional Theme 5: Experiences With Congregants

Priests have discussed how they would counsel their congregants. Priests reported, “I would start by doing a lot of listening,” “I would not judge them and just see their perspective,” “empathize with them emotionally,” “I start counseling from the Bible,” and “I try to analyze and look at the problem.” More than half of the priests stated they would try to listen to what the person had to say and try to put themselves in their shoes. Also, they stated that they needed to show them that they believe in them and help them vent as much as possible. All priests expressed that they had to remain a father and a friend to them. The participants continued to follow up with them even after their counseling sessions. Priests said, “I text them, and I call them,” “I go visit them in their homes,” and “I have them do exercises and spiritual canons.”

About half of the priests explained they needed more education in counseling. Priests reported, “I’m not a marriage counselor,” “I’m not a psychologist,” “I can help you spiritually, but I can’t help you biologically,” “I’m not a doctor,” and “I have the experience in counseling others, but I didn’t study it.” Priests felt they were able to help spiritually but knew they could not help professionally. Priests would refer their congregants to professionals. A few priests had connections with professionals to speak to congregants to help them psychologically.

Additional Theme 6: Self-Care Practices

Subtheme 1: Prayer. Prayer has been the primary reported self-care practice for priests when they are coping with stress. All priests consistently stated that prayer is their source of peace, and they use prayer for all their troubles. Priests reported, “I pray often,” “I’m disciplined with my prayer time,” “just a lot of prayer,” “praying to God to give me a lot of emotional intelligence,” and “prayer without a doubt.”

Prayer made priests feel happy and comforted. Priests explained, “you feel like God is giving you peace,” “prayer is a stress reliever,” and “it’s comforting because it is in God’s hands.” The participants explained prayer was always used to help with decisions, praying with

people, helping solve problems, or simply giving thanks for their life. Prayer was the primary practice for any issue or good news in life.

Subtheme 2: How Spending Time Alone Made The Ministry Better. Spending time alone was also a common self-care practice in ministry. More than half of the participants explained they spend time alone to recharge and relax. Taking some time off was needed for them to start work again. Priests would not answer their phones or communicate with anyone. Priests stated, “I don’t respond to text messages, phone calls, or emails,” “I’m sitting in a room by myself with no one there,” “I have my own time,” “I have to take one day rest,” and “I’m not engaging with people physically or through social media.” Priests have expressed just having silence for a few hours or a day helped immensely. It also has helped priests finish their work.

Additional Theme 7: Social Support

Subtheme 1: Supportive Spouse/Children. More than half of the participants discussed that their wives and children were supportive during their ministry. A high number of priests stated the hardest part in the priesthood is making time to spend time with family. However, some of the priests said they were able to manage to find time to spend together. Priests stated, “I spend two nights a week with my family,” “I try to take a vacation with my family,” and “I have a text group chat with my family to ensure communication.” About one-third of the participants felt that their families understood the number of responsibilities, so the priests would bring them to events, home visits, and church services.

Wives were mentioned consistently during the interviews. About half of the participants reported their wives were very supportive in the beginning and during their ministry. Priests stated, “my wife is my helpmate,” “my wife is very supportive and encouraging,” “having her as ministry partner...it’s been a real blessing for me,” and “when she shares with me her perspectives...her experiences...I listen.” Priests mentioned that their wives were the person they needed to speak to because it is a more intimate feeling to speak to a spouse than a friend or mentor. With the support of their wives, priests stated, “My wife lifted me because there is someone to listen,” “encouraged,” “grateful,” and “my wife helped me evolve with my experiences.”

Subtheme 2: Speaking To a Friend/Mentor. Priests have discussed that speaking to a mentor or a friend was very helpful for their ministry. More than half of priests expressed they would seek spiritual guidance from their mentor or friend for support, advice, and how to handle situations as a priest. Priests reported, “my mentor became my best friend,” “I speak to my mentor...my spiritual advisor,” “I have a good teacher that I can learn from,” and “I go to that person I always go to...my mentor...the senior priest.” Priests felt it helped them spiritually and to speak to someone who can give objective advice. Priests reported, “my mentor helped from losing my sanity,” “my mentor brings me back to reality to let me know that I did not do anything wrong,” and “I enjoy connecting with my friend.” Having a mentor or a friend to vent to and spend time with brought many of the participants’ close relationships.

Subtheme 3: Supportive Congregation. Priests reported they had received a great deal of support from the congregation. Priests explained many of the congregants were attending church and were doing what they expect them to do as Christians. Priests reported, “they’re praying,” “they’re reading their Bibles,” “the congregation did not conform into politics,”

“they’re respectful to others,” “they are attending church every week,” “they look forward to seeing the priests,” “I have congregants as task managers to help me,” and “they are helping each other.” As the participants were speaking about their congregants, their facial expressions were consistently smiling. The participants reported feeling happy and pleased with their congregation members.

Additional Theme 8: Spiritual Fulfillment

Subtheme 1: Relationship With God. All priests have stated that they have a strong relationship with God. They felt they would not know where they would be in life without God. Priests reported, “I felt an enormous amount of support and grace from God,” “God is taking care of all my problems,” “God has given me so much,” “I work faithfully by trusting God during the hours of the day I work,” “God is the answer to every problem,” “God has given me peace,” and “I have learned to trust God.” The participants noted an enormous amount of faith in God and a close relationship with God. They bring their concerns to God through prayer and fasting. The participants felt and believed that “God performs miracles,” “God loves me,” and “God is in control.” The participants were quite vocal about God, and they noted God in all aspects of their lives because they believe he is the answer to all concerns.

Subtheme 2: Reflection On Years In Ministry. Priests have reflected on the number of years they have been in ministry. All Coptic priests have stated they felt that it was a challenging path, but they felt fulfilled in their ministry. Priests reported, “I’ve grown a lot in ministry,” “it’s hard, but it’s a blessing,” “I’m grateful for that I can do,” “it’s a challenge, but it’s fulfilling,” and “I can’t see myself doing something better.” The priests explained that it was a learning experience, and their experiences have allowed them to feel empathy for others.

Comparison of the Findings with Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework did support the findings of the study. First, it supported the findings because the priests had expectations of motivation to help others once they accepted the calling and starting the ministry. Others felt the job was going to be easy, that they could easily achieve goals, and that they were going to be happy. However, some felt it was going to be a hard job that required a great deal of wisdom, patience, and a great deal of commitment (expectancy). Because they felt they had some experience helping the church, mentors, and devoted congregations, they expected excellent results (instrumentality). The benefits the priests gained from their hard work were congregants learning from the priest and not acting hypocritical, getting administrative work finished, spending time enough time with family and oneself, and high church attendance (valence). With these three factors in place, many of the priests have gained motivation because their hard work resulted in benefits and rewards.

Discussion of the Results

Although the initial goal of the study was to understand Coptic Orthodox priests’ experiences with fulfillment and/or stress, another vital experience they all discussed was their

journey to become a priest. One of the main findings in the study that emerged was accepting the invitation to become a Coptic Orthodox priest. Sources of stress included the challenges of administration and working with congregants, and they coped by utilizing self-care practices. They also felt a strong relationship with God and fulfillment in ministry.

The invitation to join the priesthood appeared to be a significant experience in and of itself. This seemed to be very meaningful because many Christian leaders usually apply for the job and choose to attend seminary school (Aziz et al., 2017). For the participants, it was an approach, a vote, or an invitation. It was unexpected and sudden for the participants. They felt negative about becoming priesthood because they already had a “path” for their lives: they had degrees, careers, and financial stability. Becoming a Coptic Orthodox priest requires time, working on weekends, and weeknights with a lower salary. Therefore, leaving their current lifestyle to become a priest was not only unexpected but undesirable.

The participants had to consider their personal feelings; they had to think of their spouses and children. The priests reported that their families were shocked about the invitation and why they were chosen. Some wives were adamant about their husbands not becoming priests and felt they would not be spending as much time with their husbands. It was going to be a sacrifice for the wives and children. Therefore, the decision was not just for the priests but for the entire family.

The participants described an intense decision-making process before accepting the invitation. The decision-making process caused them to feel stressed and overwhelmed for quite some time, from two to ten years. The participants felt they needed God and to see if ministry was the right path for them. The decision became the right one after extensive prayer, fasting, and mentorship. Their mentors consisted of other priests and bishops to guide them on how the priesthood would be. Even though this was a stressful time for all participants, there was a sense of peace when they officially decided to join the priesthood. Once the priests gave the official “yes,” they still had their expectations on how the ministry would be.

The participants had different expectations and assumptions towards the priesthood. There were some participants who thought it was going to be easy to help people and deal with basic administrative issues. They figured it would be easier than dealing with their previous careers. Others thought it might be a challenge but not rigorous. They knew it would be time-consuming from growing up with other priests and observing their schedules. Some participants thought they were able to handle the ministry because they were involved in church. Therefore, there were different expectations on how the priesthood would be, but they did not receive the full picture.

After accepting the invitation, the priesthood became quite stressful and overwhelming. The most significant stressors that the participants had to deal with is working with congregants and handling church responsibilities. The participants dealt with all sorts of problems, such as finances with the church, scheduling, and completing work that needed to be done. Priests had to prepare sermons on a weekly. Sometimes they would have to prepare more than one depending on if they had different events. Priests would also have to pray liturgies a few times a week and prepare multiple sermons. Baptisms, funerals, and weddings were planned and performed. There

were times where unexpected problems would come up with administration and needed to be handled. Administration responsibilities were not the only stressful times for priests but also with their congregation members.

The priests spent a great deal of time helping congregants, and it became rather stressful. Priests said they dealt with lack of church attendance with congregants, constant need for counseling sessions, and congregants not listening to them. Counseling was a big stressor because priests would have to spend hours with them to come up with a solution, or the priests would have to refer to them to somebody else if they could not identify a solution. Priests reported dealing with serious counseling issues, such as homosexuality, mental illness, drug addiction, marriage counseling, and pornography. Some priests would deal with anywhere between 40 to 400 families. Working with congregants was a big priority and responsibility to the ministry. With all of that, there was a small amount of time to cope and take care of themselves physically and emotionally.

The participants reported making time to practice self-care and recuperate from their busy schedules. With rest, they were able to get back to work. Even taking one day off out of the week helped the priests take care of their mental health and relieve stress. Taking naps, praying, watching television, or exercising was an excellent way to practice self-care and decrease anxiety. Spending time alone and making the time for activities helped decrease stress and cope with their stressors. Self-care was beneficial in their lives, but having social support was even more helpful.

The participants had social support, such as their mentors, friends, and spouses. They were able to seek advice on situations or advice on their ministry. More than half of the participants enjoyed spending time with their kids and seeking advice from their wives. All priests had situations they could not figure out, so having that social support gave them more clarity on how to handle the issue. Having love and real understanding from their loved ones has helped them to continue to help others. With the amount of help and support from their families and mentors, their ministry became more comforting and fulfilling.

Despite the stressors they faced, the participants were fulfilled with their ministry. Their fulfillment appeared to outweigh the stressors. The participants reported feeling fulfilled from working with the congregants. The congregants were going to church and listening to the priests. They were helping at church programs, Sunday school, and administration. The priests stated the congregants were like family to them, and they felt loved and respected. They had deep and meaningful relationships with the congregants.

They also reported relying slowly on their relationship with God. Praying was their ultimate guide and to help toward every problem. Prayer reassured them that their concerns would be answered. The participants reported that God has always been their strength and peace. The priests stated they prayed through every suffering, and the participants felt comforted that God was always there. They continued to thank God for their ministry, and they continued praying to stay secure in their relationship with God.

The results that were reported answered the research question describing the experiences of stress and fulfillment in Coptic Orthodox priests. The priests focused on what stressed them in their ministry. The process of joining the priesthood was a stressor because it was an unplanned calling. Handling and completing administrative work such as scheduling, writing sermons, planning events, and managing finances was stressful. Finally, working and counseling congregants each week was overwhelming and was very time-consuming. Coptic Orthodox priests dealt with these stressors daily.

The research question also answered their experiences in fulfillment. Even though they were stressed, all of them were fulfilled in their ministry. Their fulfillment came from having God in their lives. They enjoyed working and seeing positive results with their congregants. The positive results made them happy to see that counseling is working. Moreover, the congregants were like family to them and enjoyed having meaningful relationships. The participants felt it was the path that was intended for them, and they would not change their ministry for anything.

These findings might have turned out the way they did based on the limitations of the study. There were limitations in the data collection method. Perhaps the participants answered their interview questions to align with what the researcher is looking for. The sample size and geographical regions were limited. There were only ten participants in this study, so this did not represent the entire population. Also, the participants were only interviewed in the mid-Atlantic region. There could be various perspectives from priests who live in different parts of the U.S or the world. Now, the data analysis was a limitation because researchers might have different opinions on what findings are important. These limitations might have had an impact on the study.

Implications for Practice

This study has indicated practical implications for pastors, priests, and other leaders in their ministries. Because of the stress, Christian leaders can experience mental health professionals could provide personal support and referrals for congregants for extra help. It would be beneficial to instruct Christian leaders on coping methods to help increase fulfillment. Religious organizations should consider a different process for selecting a pastor, priests, and other superiors who can be more prepared for the ministry. These implications can be very useful in making ministry life less complicated.

One practical implication that would help Coptic Orthodox priests is to collaborate with medical and mental health professionals to assist with counseling congregants and provide personal support. Coptic Orthodox priests stated in the study that they are dealing with difficult issues from the congregants such as mental health issues, marital problems, and addiction. These are problems that many priests or Christian leaders do not have the education and training to effectively counsel congregants, yet congregants are very used to reaching out to their priests for help. Professionals can also teach the priests how to advise and provide them with skills to be a more effective counselor to the congregants.

Another benefit of this relationship is that the professional can provide informal support for Coptic Orthodox priests and perhaps advise when they may need professional assistance

themselves. The priests have mentioned in the study they talk to their wives and experienced mentors; however, they are not trained mental health professionals. Trained professionals can assist in improving self-esteem, relieve them from anxiety or depression, and improve communication skills. Mental health professionals gave positive direction to help pastors better prepare themselves without feeling stressed. Pastors seeking professional help and were self-disclosing their issues have felt more relaxed. A mental health professional can assist with how to cope with their emotions and enhance fulfillment. Also, having a closer relationship with God and practicing self-care has shown to increase happiness (Wilson, 2016). Therefore, mental health professionals can be precious to a Christian leader's ministry.

An implication for religious organizations could be utilizing a different selection process for Christian leaders. It is essential to find potential Christian leaders that are mentally and religiously prepared for the ministry. This implication would be useful because it can assist them in providing some protection from burnout and strengthening their commitment to the ministry. Religious organizations should focus on prospective Christian leaders' age limit, analyze their theological background, and perhaps provide classes on how to handle administrative responsibilities. Considering the age limit would be beneficial for the applicants because if they are old enough to understand the implications of what they are committing to truly. Having a theological background is important because they must know God's to help minister to their congregants. For Coptic Orthodox priests, the dioceses should consider the age limit to at least 35 to 40 years old. There were a few priests who were ordained younger than 35. They felt they were not prepared mentally at a younger age, and they felt more equipped at an older age. Considering the age limit is important because the prospective priest is more mature and more knowledgeable. All these implications will further enhance the mental stability of Christian leaders and will help them be more equipped to handle the ministry.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the results, this research study could be expanded by investigating the Coptic community and the priesthood. For example, the priests spoke highly of their wives. Priests had difficult times spending time with their wives, and work schedules were always conflicting. Wives were asked first for their husbands to join the priesthood. Considering these things, it would be beneficial to hear their opinions and to see if they experienced negative feelings. Perhaps they had to take the time to fast and pray along with their husbands. Learning what it is like to be the wife of a priest would help her and others to see how she deals with her emotions and family.

Another research study that would be beneficial is understanding the experiences of the Coptic priests' children as young adults. Young adults can reflect on their childhood and their experiences of having a priest as a father. It would be helpful to know their stories and opinions growing up in the Coptic church, their parents' expectations of them, and how it has shaped them as young adults.

References

- Abdelsayed, L. M., Bustrum, J. M., Tisdale, T. C., Reimer, K. S., & Camp, C. A. (2013). The impact of personality on God image, religious coping, and religious motivation among Coptic Orthodox priests. *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture, 16*(2), 155-172.
- Amin, A. M. (2020). Egyptian Orthodox church among inconsistent political and social contexts. *Contemporary Review, 7*(2), 181-199.
- Anshel, M. H., & Smith, M. (2014). The role of religious leaders in promoting healthy habits in religious institutions. *Journal of Religion and Health, 53*(4), 1046-1059.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-103-9702-5>
- Appelbaum, M., Kline, R. B., Nezu, A. M., Cooper, H., Mayo-Wilson, E., & Rao, S. M. (2018). Reporting standards for quantitative research in psychology: The APA publications and communications board task force report. *American Psychological Association, 73*(1), 3-25.
- Barratt, M. J., Ferris, J. A., & Lenton, S. (2014). Hidden populations, online purposive sampling, and external validity: Taking off the blindfold. *Field Methods, 27*(1), 3-21.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X1456838>
- Barton, R.H., Chandler, D.J., Tan, S., Tenelshof, J., & Willhoit, J.C. (2014). Spiritual formation in the church. *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care, 7*(2), 292-311.
- Belleau, J. (2015). An oriental encounter: Interculturality, awe, equivocal compatibility at the Egyptian Coptic mission of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. *Latin American Research Review, 50*(1), 54-75.
- Bussing, A., Jacobs, C., Baumann, K., & Frick, E. (2017a). Spiritual dryness in Catholic priests: Internal resources as possible buffers. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, 9*(1), 46-55.
- El-Sayed, E., Noreldin, A. K., Elsamman, M. K., Zaky, D. S., & Kaldas, E. S. (2018). Impact of Christians fasting in type 2 diabetic patients among Egyptian Coptic Orthodox. *Journal of Dialectology, 9*(3), 88-94.
- Gendi, Y. E., & Pinfari, M. (2020). Icons of contention: The iconography of martyrdom and the construction of Coptic identity in post-revolutionary Egypt. *Media, War, & Conflict, 13*(1), 50-69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635219866137>
- Heuvel, S., Schalk, R., & Assen, M. (2015). Does a well-informed employee have a more positive attitude toward change? The mediating role of psychological contract fulfillment, trust, and perceived need for change. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 51*(3), 401-422. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886315569507>
- Houghton, J. (2014). The priest as 'defender of the poor.' *Theology, 117*(3), 198-202.

- Ibrahim, M. (2019). A minority at the bar: Revisiting the Coptic Christian (in-) visibility. *Social Compass*, 66(33), 366-382.
- Kahlke, R. M. (2014). Generic qualitative approaches: Pitfalls and benefits of methodological mixology. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 13(1), 37-52.
- Kennedy, E., Allen, B., Hope, A., & James, I.A. (2014). Christian worship leaders' attitudes and observations of people and dementia. *Dementia*, 13(5), 586-597.
doi: 10.1177/1471301213479786
- Lee, H. J. (2017). How emotional intelligence relates to job satisfaction and burnout in public service jobs. *International Review of Administrative Science*, 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852316670489>
- Nixon, D. (2016). New directions in my priestly ministry: More becoming. *Theology*, 119(6), 435-442.
- Ogren, D. A. (2014). The Coptic church in South Africa: The meeting of mission and migration. *Hevormde Teologiese Studies*, 70(1), 1-7.
<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2061>
- Percy, W.H., Kostere, K., & Kostere, S. (2015). Generic qualitative research in psychology. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 76-85.
- Prevost, E. R. (2016). The problem of quality of life in ministry. *Review and Expositor*, 113(3), 315-332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637316658492>
- Pring, R. (2015). The teacher as high priest and usherer in of the Kingdom of God. *Power & Education*, 7(1), 19-28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743814567380>
- Raemdonck, A.V. (2019). The politics of Christian love: Shaping everyday social interaction and political sensibilities among Coptic Egyptians. *Religions*, 10(2), 1-13.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10020105>
- Ruth, D. (2014). Leader as priest: Plucking the fruit of a flawed metaphor. *Leadership*, 10(2), 174-190. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715012467488>
- Salama, C., Jackson, J.B., Negash, S., & Daneshpour, M. (2019). Family of origin predictors of marital outcomes among Coptic Orthodox Christian Egyptian-American couples. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 18(1), 44-64
- Shafeek, N. A. (2020). Assimilation and educational achievement: The case of Coptic Orthodox Egyptian immigrants in Texas. *International Social Science Review*, 96(2), 1-29.
- Shooter, S. (2014). How feminine participation in the divine might renew the church and its

- leadership. *Feminist Theology*, 22(2), 173-185.
- Simone, S. D. (2015). Expectancy value theory: Motivating healthcare workers. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 5(2), 19-23.
- Tampio, N. (2017). On the Coptic question. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 16, 123-130.
- Tawfik, W. A. (2017). Discipleship transforming the world. *International Review of Mission*, 106(2), 268-279.
- Tunheim, K. A., & DuChene, M. K. (2016). The professional journeys and experiences in leadership of Evangelical Lutheran church in America women bishops. *Advancing in Developing Human Resources*, 18(2), 204-222.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/153422316641896>
- Vroom, V. (1964). *Work and motivation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Williams, Q., Ralston, P. A., Young-Clark, I., & Coccia, C. (2014). Establishing health ministries: Leaders' perceptions of process and effectiveness. *Quarterly of Community Health Education*, 34(2), 139-157.
- Wilson, B. (2016). What does a healthy church look like? *Review and Expositor*, 113(3), 333-340.
- Young, J. W., & Firmin, M. W. (2014). Qualitative perspectives toward relational connection in pastoral ministry. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(47), 1-14.
- Zellelew, T. B. (2014). Meat abstinence and its positive environmental effect: Examining the fasting etiquettes of the Ethiopian Orthodox church. *Critical Research on Religion*, 2(2), 134-146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/205030321435002>