Preliminary Themes from Focus Groups on Faith in the Workplace held in Three American Cities

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Abstract

Faith and work constitute two of the largest commitments in the lives of many individuals. While a large body of practitioner literature provides resources for individuals within particular faith traditions for navigating the relationship between faith and work, empirical work on the topic is more limited. We set out to systematically analyze the challenges and possibilities that religious individuals face in their workplaces, how Christians from a range of traditions experience the interface, and whether and to what degree individuals experience discrimination because of their faith, and how religious leaders engage the topic of faith at work. As the first part of a three-phase study, we conducted nine focus with Christian leaders and congregation members in three different US cities: Seattle, New York City, and Houston. From these conversations, four major themes emerged, including: (1) when it comes to faith in the workplace, individual status matters; (2) people are more likely to engage their faith during times of stress; (3) personal faith is both a source and resource for discrimination; and (4) what pastors say about work and what congregants hear diverges. Findings have implications both for the empirical scholarship as well as the practitioner literature on faith at work.

Introduction

For many, work is the single largest time commitment in life. And for many, faith and church community are the most meaningful commitments in life. In *Faith at Work: An Empirical Study*, we set out to understand how people integrate these two facets of life. Here, we report initial findings of nine focus groups on faith and work with Christian clergy and congregation members in three US cities—Seattle, WA, New York, NY, and Houston, TX. On the basis of the preliminary findings described herein, we will also be conducting a broad-based general US population survey (*N*=12,000), as well as between 180 and 200 in-depth, follow-up interviews with survey and focus group participants. In what follows, we provide a brief review of various literatures on faith at work before describing our focus group methodology in more detail and unpacking four major themes that we observed. We conclude by outlining how these preliminary findings have informed our ongoing data collection on the topic.

Literature Review

Popular and "Practitioner" Literature

Individuals' faith commitments and church community are often a significant part of life. And for those who are employed, the hours spent working are typically the single largest time commitment in life. Understanding how people ought to integrate these two important aspects of identity has been the subject of many articles and books, including Miller's (2007) *God at Work*, which examines how the expression of faith at work has changed over the past 100 plus years; Volf's (1991) *Work in the Spirit*, which focuses on the role of the Holy Spirit in gifting believers to do work in cooperation with God; and Van Duzer's (2010) *Why Business Matters to God*, which examines the purpose of business as service to customers and employees. These books (and many others) have examined the integration of faith and work from theoretical and/or

historical perspectives, and grounded within particular faith communities. While novel and important, these works often focus most meaningfully on the direct social groups with which the writer has experience.

Other popular writings are more normative or pastoral, focused on helping (mainly) Protestants identify ways of expressing their faith at work, rather than on a descriptive understanding of how individuals actually endeavor to do so. Keller and Alsdorf's (2012) book *Every Great Endeavor*, for instance, examines how Christians can pursue purpose and meaning at work. Others elevate the dignity of everyday work, communicating the sanctity and value of that which many perceive as mundane (e.g., Garber 2014; Nelson 2011; Sherman 2011).

In sum, pastoral and normative works tend not to transcend social class, faith tradition, or gender and race differences in application. And much of the current faith at work literature focuses almost exclusively on issues of "vocational calling" and "integration of faith and work" rather than considering the possible broad range of models that originate from different Christian traditions and that might provide new possibilities for linking faith and work. The consequence of this gap is that such books focus mainly on the possibility for work to become "calling," but this is only one possible way—a way that is perhaps limited to those in certain social class sectors and occupations—that people might see the connection between their faith and work.

Current Empirical Studies

While there has not been much large-scale empirical examination of the ways that Christians appropriate their faith at work, there are two notable exceptions to this claim. Two significant qualitative studies of Christians at work have been conducted by Nash (1994) and Lindsay (2007). Both Nash and Lindsay provide empirical examinations of Christians in leadership contexts, but both are limited in three significant ways: 1) both focus exclusively on

individuals at the highest levels of leadership, whether business CEOs or political leaders; and, perhaps as a result of this emphasis, 2) both focus primarily on men; and 3) both rely upon non-random samples, severely limiting the generalizability of their findings and hence the benchmarking possibilities for the work. If we step outside of treatments that specifically focus on Christian traditions, there is a broader relevant literature that examines how spirituality and religion, (both Christianity and other world religions), show up in workplaces. Such studies document both positive and negative implications of faith in the workplace.

Positive Implications of Faith at Work

Often, empirical studies on faith in the workplace emphasize the role of religious faith in providing purpose or meaning to an individual's work. One study found that people who had internalized their religion were more likely than others to view their work as having sacred significance (Davidson and Caddell 1994). The concept of "calling," a perception that one's work has meaning or purpose to the extent that it is directed toward a greater good, has been widely studies (e.g., Bellah et al. 1985; Dik and Duffy 2009; Wrzesniewski et al. 1997). While this research on calling does not require a religious context or individuals who have a faith commitment (Hall and Chandler 2005), such language is consistent with those who have a religious or spiritual identity (Dik, Duffy, and Tix 2012), and indeed may be more likely among those with a faith commitment (Duffy, Reid, and Dik 2010). Cadge and Konieczny (2014), for example, discuss the importance of a better understanding of the implications of religious commitments for individuals in secular organizations, and argue that religion has not been as carefully conceptualized as other demographic constructs in organizational study. This is consistent with work by Guillén, Ferrero, and Hoffman (2014), who suggest that workplace

spirituality has largely been ignored by organizational researchers, resulting in an impoverished understanding of employee motivation.

And there is an accumulating body of literature that suggests—that for those who identify as people of faith—the impact of their spirituality/religion plays a role in a large number of work-related outcomes at the individual level (Jurkiewicz and Giacalone 2004), including career orientation, values, and perceived support (Duffy et al. 2010), along with the choice of occupations, particularly self-employment (Audretsch, Bonte, and Tamvada 2013), willingness to engage in entrepreneurial (Neubert et al. 2015), helping behavior, and creativity (Neubert et al. 2014). A review by Karakas (2010) found that spirituality expressed at work enhances employee well-being, provides a sense of purpose and meaning, and creates community. The evidence suggests that employees who can fully express their spirituality at work are happier than those who cannot (Garcia-Zamor 2003). In addition, there appears to be an impact of faith at work on organizational outcomes. Fry (2013) has found that organizations whose leaders have a positive orientation to faith and spirituality in the workplace often experience a positive impact on the "triple bottom line," an accounting approach used to evaluate the financial, environmental, and social performance of organizations.

Challenges Associated with Faith at Work

Empirical research also suggests that organizations are often conflicted in whether and how they allow their employees to express their faith at work. On the one hand, there is growing documentation that workplaces are increasingly open to spiritual practices at work, with the introduction of workplace chaplains, meditation rooms, shamanism at conferences, "vision quests," and yoga practices, to name just a few (Conlin 1999; Greene 2012). On the other hand, this increased tolerance for spiritual practices in the workplace does not necessarily extend to

religious practices (Cash, Gray, and Rood 2000). Organizations appear to be increasingly

concerned about the implications of religious expression in the workplace (Hicks 2002), insofar

as it may be viewed as harassment (Gilmer and Anderson 1998) or create other conflicts with US

labor laws (Berg 1998; Foltin and Standish 2004; Gregory 1989). Changing sexual mores may

exacerbate the perceived conflict between religious expression and legal protections on the basis

of sex (Bond, Hollywood, and Colgan 2009), particularly when religious identities, beliefs, and

practices seem to impinge on the rights of others, such as women and LGBTQ employees or

customers.

　　As a result, many employees have difficulty finding ways to practice their spiritual

beliefs at work or may believe that the expression of their faith is unwelcome (Grant, O'Neil, and

Stephens 2004). Furthermore, evidence suggests that when employees' values and spiritual

aspirations are congruent with the organizations in which they work, employees are more likely

to find meaning at work and to work more productively (Harrington, Preziosi, and Gooden

2001). Lack of alignment between one's faith and the organization's values may in some cases

drive turnover, apathy, and cynicism. One recent study showed that a number of Christian

entrepreneurs were at least partly motivated to leave prior jobs due to work/faith tensions

(Griebel, Park, and Neubert 2014). Yet running one's own business is not necessarily a

protection against the perceived conflict between faith and work. Due to the religious convictions

of their owners, some organizations have objected to recent changes in federal health care

requirements requiring employers to cover contraceptives and possibly pregnancy termination.

Such instances made national headlines with the Hobby Lobby case making its way to the

Supreme Court (Liptak, 2014). Similarly, since the legalization of same-sex marriage there have

been a few cases where individuals have cited their faith commitments in declining to provide

goods or services for marriages between those of the same sex, actions that have resulted in

adverse legal consequences and/or community pressure (Nelson, 2013).

A Particular Challenge: Religion-Related Employment Discrimination

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 details the regulations that protect workers from

being discriminated against due to their religion (or their race, color, sex, or national origin). At

its core, Title VII states that an employer cannot

> …fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise
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> to discriminate against any individual with respect to his
>
> compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of
>
> employment…[or] to limit, segregate, or classify his employees or
>
> applicants for employment in any way which would deprive or
>
> tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or
>
> otherwise adversely affect his status as an employee because of
>
> such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Employers must make "reasonable accommodation" for employees' religious beliefs or show

that they could not have provided accommodation "without undue hardship on the conduct of the

employer's business." Of course, the issue of what defines reasonable accommodation or undue

hardship is at the heart of many court cases surrounding discrimination complaints. Cash, Gray,

and Rood (2000) argue that there is often a lower level of tolerance for more traditional

expressions of religion in the workplace than for non-traditional forms of spirituality. They note

that many businesses will allow and even encourage or organize employee meditation, yoga, or

nature retreats while simultaneously resisting employees' expressions of traditional religion (e.g.,

Bible study groups, displaying Biblical scripture in workspaces, etc.). Empirical research on the extent and nature of religious discrimination in the workplace, however, remains scant.

Differences among Christian Traditions and Approach to Faith at Work

Another gap in the faith at work literature is that there is little research on differences among Christian traditions in their approaches to faith at work. The one exception is recent research conducted by Neubert and Dougherty (2012), which suggests that there are clear differences among Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestants, and Catholics in attitudes and practices associated with positive workplace performance (see Park, Dougherty, and Neubert 2016 for an excellent review piece). They found significant differences in the extent to which various Christian religious traditions emphasized faith-work connections—which they referenced as Congregational Faith-Work Integration (CFWI); Black Protestant churches were rated highest on CFWI, followed by Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, and Catholic congregations, respectively.

Demographic Differences in Approach to Faith at Work

Although largely unexplored in the existing literature, demographic factors might also shape perceptions of faith at work. For instance, some studies (Lynn, Naughton, and VanderVeen, 2011) demonstrate that levels of work-faith integration increase with age. Nonetheless, the same study suggests that gender remains unrelated to views on faith and work, despite the comparatively high religiosity of women when compared to men. Reason suggests that race, socioeconomic status, and occupational category might also play a salient role in how people connect their religious beliefs to their vocational goals. A general weakness in the existing scholarship on religion at work is that few studies address how an understanding the

connection between faith and work might differ according to race, gender, or socioeconomic status characteristics.

Research Questions

We endeavor to fill gaps in the extant literature by conducting a large-scale empirical study examining how Christians and other religious groups appropriate their faith at work. Specifically, we seek to address several research questions related to faith at work: What challenges and possibilities do religious individuals face in their workplaces? How do Christians—the largest religious group in the United States—compare to other religious groups in terms of expressing their religious faith at work, experiencing religious discrimination at work, or engaging religious leaders about workplace issues? How do different racial groups compare in how they understand faith at work and religious discrimination? These questions have guided the design of a multi-phase study of faith and work in the United States. Addressing these issues will have both theoretical and practical contributions. In terms of scholarship, the study contributes to our understanding of organizational and individual-level implications for lived religion, as well as contribute to our understanding of the influence of faith on organizational structure and performance. Practitioners, we suggest, would gain from a systematic approach to analyzing the virtues and challenges of faith in the workplace. Here, we report on initial findings from focus groups conducted for this study.

Methods

Data for the current paper come from focus groups conducted for *Faith at Work: An Empirical Study*. The broader study entails three phases of data collection, with focus groups comprising the first stage. Subsequent phases will include a general population survey of United States adults (N=12,000), which will launch in 2018, and follow-up interviews with 170 survey

takers and 30 Christian pastors. Focus groups entailed guided discussions with small groups to learn about how people experience faith in the context of work. Altogether, we conducted nine focus groups in three cities (three groups per city): Seattle, WA, New York City, and Houston, TX. We selected these cities partly to provide geographical diversity, in order to understand how geographical context shapes the character of discourse about faith and work, and partly to reduce travel costs (the principal investigator and co-principal investigator reside in Houston and Seattle, respectively). Focus groups, according to Rubin and Rubin (2012), allow researchers to observe how groups respond to questions related to the study. In a group setting, participants can engage each other's responses, agreeing or disagreeing, building upon or modifying ideas that emerge. By asking the same questions to multiple groups, our aim was to develop and refine survey and interview questions for the latter phases of the study.

We were intentional about including men and women, black, Latino, Asian, and white church leaders and congregants, individuals representing a range of socioeconomic positions, as well as participants representing a range for Christian traditions including mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Catholic churches. To this aim, we implemented multiple strategies to recruit and sample focus group participants. First, we received referrals, mostly for Christian pastors rather than congregation members, from members of our primary advisory board and our network advisory board. Together, the two boards currently consist of 31 individuals from a range of backgrounds, including scholars, authors, Christian clergy, journalists, and other professionals with interest in the intersection between faith and work. We also posted printed flyers on church and parish bulletin boards, and we advertised online using Craigslist. We provided all focus group participants post-incentives of $25 per person, an offer that was advertised in all printed and electronic recruitment materials.

To be included in the focus groups, we verified that participants identified as either Christian pastors or congregants, were fluent in the English language, and were over the age of eighteen. We identified as ineligible any potential participant under the age of 18, were unemployed, or attended religious services less than once per month. Ultimately, we led three focus groups in each city, including one focus group with religious leaders, particularly Protestant pastors from a range of denominational backgrounds as well as Catholic priests, and two focus groups with Christian congregation members. Focus groups in Seattle were held on January 17 and 18, 2018, and included 12 pastors and 12 congregation members. New York City focus groups were conducted on February 28 and March 1, 2019, with five pastors and 14 congregation members. Finally, Houston focus groups occurred on April 4 and 5, 2018, and included nine and 19 congregation members. In total, we spoke with 26 Christian leaders and 45 Christian congregation members. The focus groups were taped, fully transcribed, and then analyzed according to a modified inductive paradigm.

Findings

Altogether, our nine focus groups yielded a total of sixteen hours of conversation that produced 275 pages of transcribed material. We have identified four major themes that emerged during our conversations with Christian pastors and congregation members. In brief, they include: (1) when it comes to faith in the workplace, individual status matters; (2) faith enters the workplace at times of stress; (3) personal faith is both a source and resource for discrimination; and (4) what pastors say about work and what congregants hear diverges. In what follows, we discuss findings related to each of these major themes in turn.

Theme 1: When it comes to faith in the workplace, individual status matters.

Organizational role and job type appear to influence the way in which faith is understood and operationalized at work. Those with more agency at work—i.e., those ranked higher in their organizations and in more professional roles—were more likely to express ways their faith brought meaning to their work when compared with those ranked lower or in labor roles. This contrast was most evident when comparing comments from entry level service sector employees and corporate executives. A waiter[1] in New York City, for example, described the impact of faith in his occupation, which he described as a sales-type job (characterized by low status and low agency) when he stated, rather matter-of-factly, "No sense of higher calling in sales, it's a source of income." For him, his job is only about providing material resources. To be sure, this kind of blunt response was not typical among our focus group of self-identifying Christians. But more often than not, those who did talk about their work in terms of spiritual or religious calling tended to occupy positions of higher status, power, agency, and creative control.

For example, a high-level executive[2] in Seattle described the implications of faith at work in terms of maintaining integrity:

> The world of finance gets a bad rap in general for lack of transparency….you know one of the things that I try to do as a Christian certainly is maintain that level of transparency, where you're giving information, the right information, accurate information, the truthful way, even if that means losing out on business.

Unlike the waiter, this finance executive talks about the influence of his faith on how he does his work. He also expressed feeling empowered to work in ways congruent with his faith, *even at the cost of losing business*. Another high status worker[3] in the technology industry offered:

I believe that we were created by God, God is a creative being, and

I believe that as humans, but specifically as Christians, I believe

we're created to create. So for me, I do believe that I have a calling

for business, specifically to create solutions to challenges or create

new business ideas, and these types of things. So, you know, I

think (my work) definitely gives me, that's my sense of purpose.

God created me with talents to be creative at the things that he's

put in front of me to do, and then specifically business.

For this person, who works in a dynamic and creative setting (and therefore presumably characterized by a high level of decision-making), their everyday work is infused with *religious* meaning.

Other high status talked about their work in terms of religious calling as well, expressing how their faith provides purpose or meaning to their work. One COO[4] identified faith as motivation for pursuing *and changing* careers.

I feel kind of strongly that my work is a vocation, or is a calling

moreso than just, like, a means to earn money. And I work for a

Christian non-profit right now, and so a lot of my work is Christian

now. But for, I guess, more than a decade prior to that, I was in a

secular setting as a lawyer and even in that setting, I felt very

strongly like that my faith played a significant part into my day-to-

day work as well as the reason I went into the practice of law and

the reason why I left my firm to eventually come work where I'm

at now.

And a general manager[5] for a large technology company said:

> So one of the reasons that I took the role that I have now is because
> our—we have a very clear set of values for artificial intelligence.
> And our head of design in this group is also our head of ethics, we
> have an ethics board. So I felt like if I take that job, given the scale
> of what we're doing in AI, there's an impact I can make by making
> sure that as we design our approach to AI, it can be grounded in a
> set of values that are healthy for society. So there's a match
> between my values, hence my faith, and choosing that job,
> choosing that work.

Interestingly, not only do these high status professionals articulate a sense of purpose in their work, they also talk about *choosing* their work, even though their current positions generally require high levels of training and credentials. Not only did they both indicate that faith was an important motivator for pursuing a career in law, the former also presumably had the resources *and opportunity* to leave a high-status position and join another firm that had a specifically Christian mission.

In sum, organizational role and job type matters in at least two ways. First, those with high status more often expressed ways in which their work was meaningful or had a sense of purpose in terms of their faith. Second, those in positions of power also more often expressed having the agency to work in ways that align with their faith. Questions remain about organizational cultures and/or structural conditions requisite for transgressing corporate interests in the name of religious virtue, as well as real and felt consequences for working in such a matter across varying levels of status within organizations.

In addition to organizational role and job type, we also seek to understand through our forthcoming survey and interviews whether ascribed characteristics of workers—such as race/ethnicity, gender, and parental social class—shape the mode and degree to which individuals integrate faith and work. While focus group data is limited, we got the sense that Black Church congregation members were more likely to engage pastors on issues of work than white congregation members. They also saw work more as a marker of success or blessing. In terms of gender, older men do not engage with female pastors, though men seem to engage with pastors less generally.

Theme 2: Faith enters the workplace at times of stress.

Our focus groups also suggested that for most, faith at work is very personal and situational. For many, faith is about ethics—being "nice" and talking about Jesus is a dominant expression of faith in the workplace. And the salience of faith in the workplace often becomes clear in response to work stress or crisis. Participants in New York City, particularly, expressed the ubiquity of stress. Generally, we observed our religious focus group participants expressing two strategies when confronted with either the diffuse everyday stress of work or incidents of acute crisis at work: coping and compromise.

First, faith operates for some as a strategy for *coping* at work. For some, while not particularly important during mundane circumstances, faith shows up as a mechanism for coping with momentary stress or crisis. One high-level executive,[6] for example, leans on his faith in moments when he feels powerless because of circumstances at work. He reflected, "And you tell yourself, you know, don't worry about things you can't have control over… having faith helps me, you know, when I don't have control over those other things that are creating tensions and such like that." Notably, the executive has a high level of organizational power and is generally

empowered to make decisions in the context of his work. He leans on his faith in those moments, however, when he cannot. Similarly, a make-up artist[7] in New York City recounted, "I basically have to, um, use wisdom and basically remain mute but yet endure this opposition and hostility towards my faith…at the end "God's Will" will prevail." While the make-up artist has less organizational power, he similarly leans on his faith in moments when he feels circumstances contradict his religious convictions. His faith provides him a sense of resilience in moments that he perceives to be a sort of moral crisis.

Others employ religious faith to combat a more diffuse sense of stress resulting from the banality of "the grind" (or a sense of working hard for little reward), especially those with little agency or creative expression in their work. For such individuals, we heard of faith being employed to counteract negative emotions. A waiter,[8] for example, describes how thinking about his faith orients his attitude about starting the work day, saying, "I start off in the morning with a prayer, and just saying to myself, "This is gonna be a great day… Starting off that way in the morning gives me a sense of positive vibe." Similarly, a clerk[9] in Houston expressed, "Every day I go in prayed up. I pray to get through the next hour, then pray to get to lunch and then pray to get to the end of the day." And an accountant[10] said bluntly, "I think my faith makes me more positive….if I didn't have my faith. I'd probably just be angry 24/7." For each of these participants, faith provides a sense of mental resilience to the stress of work, whether in a general or pervasive sense (as expressed by the waiter and accountant) or in a situational sense (as with the executive who occasionally feels powerless or the make-up artist confronted with working conditions that make him uncomfortable).

Second, stressful work environments can force workers to *compromise* the boundaries of their faith—such as not having time for religious involvement or forcing actions that violate

religious norms. For example, one fundraiser[11] talks about feeling conflicted when pitching to a

potential client organization.

> Built into my job is the communications piece, where I am sort of
>
> constantly thinking about how much should we massage the truth.
>
> You know, there is a lot of storytelling in fundraising. There are
>
> statistics that you want to present to potential donors that are
>
> flattering and there are others that you don't and, you know, I'm
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> sort of the arbiter of truth [laughs] in these organizations….we're
>
> sort of like piecing together a very specific um truth that, you
>
> know, is very flattering but um, yeah, sometimes I am sort of
>
> conflicted about how much we should be doing that.

In other words, she sometimes feels like she must tell a very selective version of the truth, and

this causes her discomfort. Notably, she offers no solution, and seems to draw none from her

faith as well.

In addition to sacrificing in terms of religious values, the stress of work can infringe upon

religious time. A speech pathologist,[12] for example, talked about the frustration of having to

work on certain Christian holidays:

> When I first began, I had a hard time with the director of rehab
>
> because I would tell her that I really want Good Friday off because
>
> I like to go to church and I like to participate in the seven last
>
> words of Christ, and that's a big thing for me, and so when I first
>
> began, it was very difficult. You know, she said, "Well, I don't
>
> know if I'm gonna have coverage, I don't know if I can find

another speech therapist that would be able to work on the Friday,"

and then the alternative is I would have to work the Sunday before.

Well the Sunday before is usually Palm Sunday, right? [everyone

laughs] So it's like I feel this tension of well do I miss Palm

Sunday service and work and then have Good Friday off, or do I

work Good Friday and figure out what I want to do in terms of

what I feel I want to do on a Good Friday, so I usually have that

tension of, "Okay, which one should I take off, and how many

speech therapists can I call a month or two prior and say, 'Hey,

would you be willing to work on Good Friday for me?'" So each

year, I always have that tension.

As a matter of procedure, this worker recognizes a need to schedule a replacement worker on

days they want to take off for religious observance. But in this case, several meaningful holidays

occurred within a relatively short amount of time (i.e., Palm Sunday and Good Friday, both

important Christian holidays). She not only felt a burden to find replacements but some shame in

asking them to work in her place. Ultimately, perhaps because of a dearth of willing and capable

substitutes, this speech therapist felt the need to choose which holiday to observe and which to

not observe.

In sum, faith can operate as a strategy for survival at work, showing up in times of crisis,

if not in everyday work life (especially for those with low levels of status or authority). In such

times, faith can ameliorate stress. That said, stressful work environments can also cause

compromise of time and values. Many participants felt overworked and found solace in Sabbath

but struggled to maintain its boundaries.

Theme 3: Personal faith is both a source and resource for discrimination.

The workplace can be a site for discrimination, including both overtly hurtful comments and actions as well as unintended (but still hurtful) microaggressions related to a person's race, gender, sexuality, or even religion. Because of the utility of religious faith in coping with stress (as discussed above), religion therefore occupies dual-roles when it comes to discrimination. First, some experience discrimination because of their religious identity and behavior. A PhD student[13] recounted to us a story about religious discrimination experienced by a friend of his. He said:

> …basically my friend, for her thesis, she put in there that she
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> thanked God and maybe a little bit extra on that, you know, it was
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> like a sentence or two I would say in the acknowledgements. And
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> she actually received multiple emails from some other researchers
>
> who were, you know, pretty aggressively just attacking her for it.

Not only was religion a source of discriminatory experience, it also served as a resource for coping with discrimination. A retired retail cashier[14] in Seattle, for instance, describes her strategy of transferring the sting of experiencing discrimination from herself to God, stating "I don't know, they're just out to get you, like you're an example and you just don't even know why. Either they sense that there's something in you, or I mean maybe they're just against God, I don't know, but there are people that are just not good people [laughs]." By aligning herself with God, she can reinterpret the act of discrimination as not about her, personally. Instead, she understands the cause of the act to be that the perpetrator is not aligned properly with God. Perhaps this helps keep her from feeling shame or anger.

Another focus group participant[15] relied upon her faith when she believed racial discrimination was occurring. She was referring to an event organized by a black university board member that a white university president was choosing not to promote. She says:

> Sometimes I step back and I think and try to assess the situation so
> that I'm not projecting my own feelings upon him. But it turned
> out, I'm still asking the question, why wouldn't the president of a
> university promote an event that's given by a department in the
> university [laughs]. You know, that's so new and fresh you know,
> but it was important to send out an email about a wedding.

With a tone of sarcasm, she questions whether the apparent priorities of the institution betray a hidden bias against African Americans. But it is her faith, she says, that reins in her response to make sure it is not unduly personal or irrational.

In the context of work, then, religion can either be the reason someone experiences discrimination or a tool for helping someone deal with the experience of discrimination. Faith can be therefore be a source of felt tension, and members of our focus groups expressed feeling surprised when it was experienced even in Christian workplaces. Through our upcoming survey and interviews, we hope to probe the theme of religious discrimination in more detail. Specifically, we hope to compare the relative frequency of experiences of discrimination among Christians and non-Christians, as well as identity the organizational factors that make discrimination more or less likely.

Theme 4: What pastors say about work and what congregants hear diverges.

Our focus group respondents revealed a fairly broad gulf between what pastors think they are communicating about faith and work, and how their parishioners perceive these messages.

Focus group pastors tended to emphasize their theological understanding of the importance of work, but congregants reported that their pastors did not talk much about work, and many of them reported that they would not feel comfortable or it had never occurred to them to discuss work related issues with their pastors. To be sure, most pastors feel that they should, and do, talk about work. One pastor[16] in Houston described how he goes out of his way to meet people where they work, saying, "I go to the workplaces. I insist on meeting them at their office. I walk the towers of downtown."

Another exchange during the focus group of pastors in New York City was telling. One pastor[17] was responding to a question about what resources would be useful to him as a pastor, reflected on his "dream resource" as follows:

> I was thinking it would be a psychologist, a full-time one, but no it's a full-time trained spiritual director with an open schedule that people can come to. Like really full-time, 40 hours a week, you know, this is a full-time spiritual director on-site [at the church] that people can come to so that when issues do come up in the workplace or outside of the workplace, congregants can better have tools to deal with that.

In response to this, another pastor[18] asked, "My question to that is: Is that part of the pastors' job description?" So while there was wide agreement that the pastoral response to faith at work was important, they also seemed to suggest that this particular responsibility would be quite demanding of their time if it were to be done adequately.

In spite of the pastors acknowledging the importance of supporting their congregants' work-lives, their congregants were not hearing explicit messages about work from their pastors.

When asked about whether pastors talk about work, the a congregation member who works in sales[19] said, "Very, very little, to the point that I can't even recall something—very little... Specific work-related, no." A second[20] reflected:

> I would say yes in that—not just even my current church, I'm
>
> thinking of all the churches I've attended in my life, and it's been a
>
> big part of I feel like hearing about work. I can't think of
>
> examples, but I feel like a lot of what I learn or hear on Sundays I
>
> import into work, which is why my—my gut says yes, even though
>
> I don't have specific examples.

The first, then, bluntly reported that they did not hear their pastor talking about work-related issues while the second was unable to come up with specific examples. It is possible that they simply felt that much of the pastor's homiletic teachings were applicable to life broadly, and they—perhaps unknowingly—assumed the hermeneutic task of applying the pastors teaching to their own work.

We also observed that pastors tended to *define* the concept of "work" very broadly—e.g., what a person does in their waking hours—but they *talked* about work more narrowly, usually in reference to paid work. We did not observe much of a broad integrative framework when pastors discussed talking about work with their congregants, despite their best theological intents.

Conclusions

One strikingly consistent meta-theme from our focus groups among Christians in Seattle, New York City, and Houston is that faith in the workplace generally manifests for our participants in very personal terms. They generally did *not* interpret faith in terms of collective organization or behavior. In other words, focus group participants indicated that faith tends to

influence their feelings or reactions in various situations, but not structural characteristics of their work environments. More to the point, according to those who participated in our focus groups, faith does not *usually* seem to shape for-profit business models, organizational charts, or mission statements—at least not from the perspective of workers. Distinguishing oneself as a person of faith seemed often to be about expressing certain coded messages.

Specifically, we observed four major themes for how faith entered the workplace. First, organizational status and job role matter. That is, a sense of vocational calling or religiously meaningful work tended to be expressed by those with high levels of status, organizational authority, decision-making power, and job roles entailing creativity, but not their lower status counterparts. Second, faith becomes salient in the workplace at times of stress and crisis. Sometimes a person's faith appears as a coping mechanism, providing solace in stressful situations; at other times a person's faith commitments appears to *create* increased stress, such as when a person is required to compromise their time or faith values at work. Third, personal faith is both a source of discrimination and resource for dealing with discrimination (religious or otherwise). Finally, we observed a gulf between what pastors say about work and what congregants hear.

As indicated in the discussion of findings, focus groups were telling, but a great deal more regarding faith in the workplace remains to be understood. Themes from our focus group helped to shape our approach to the next phases of data collection, including a nationally representative survey—for the large scale measurement of attitudes and experiences about faith and work as well as religious discrimination—and in-depth interviews with study participates and religious leaders. Specifically, we hope these modes of data collection will shed further light on: issues of autonomy, control, and agency; ability or desirability for faith to impact

organizational structures, not just individual behaviors; to what perceptions of calling and meaning and connected; the instrumentality of work (for whom and when is work meaningful versus instrumental?); whether those who work discuss workplace issues with a pastor or church leader; gender and religion at work; how different occupational groups might have different frames or needs related to faith at work; and generational differences (whether older adults see work as a measure of success, defined by money or otherwise, versus whether younger generations seek more meaning at work, perhaps more important than money).

Our preliminary findings contribute to the empirical literature on both the virtues and challenges of faith in the workplace. First, our findings suggest that the perception of work as a religious or spiritual calling might be limited to those who enjoy greater levels of agency or creative expression in their work, as well as those with high levels of status and power. Second, our findings suggest that the stress of a workplace environment can lead to tension with regard to an individual's religious faith, sometimes causing individuals to compromise time or values related to their religious commitments. Finally, our focus group members shared experiences not only of feeling discriminated against in their workplace because of their faith, but also that they often relied upon their faith to cope with discrimination on the basis of other factors such as race and/or gender. Through our next phases of research, including a large nationally-representative survey and follow-up in-depth interviews, we aim to further elucidate these patterns.

Endnotes

[1] FGC_15, Waiter, Man, New York City

[2] FGC_05, Finance Executive, Man, Seattle

[3] FGC_12, Principal Consultant, Man, Seattle

[4] FGC_18, COO (former law firm partner), Woman, New York City

[5] FGC_09, General Manager, Man, Seattle

[6] FGC_08, Executive Director of communications/design firm, Man, Seattle

[7] FGC_26, Makeup Artist, Man, New York City

[8] FGC_15, Waiter, Man, New York City

[9] FGC_38, Clerk at a staffing agency, Woman, Houston

[10] FGC_17, Accountant, Man, New York City

[11] FGC_23, Stay at home mom/consultant (previously an attorney and fundraising professional), Woman, New York City

[12] FGC_27, Licensed Speech Language Pathologist, Woman, Houston

[13] FGC_43, PhD Student, Man, Houston

[14] FGC_01, Retired Retail Cashier, Woman, Seattle

[15] FGC_40 Assistant Pastor, Woman, Houston

[16] FGP_18, Pastor, Man, Houston

[17] FGP_19, Pastor, Man, Houston

[18] FGP_25, Pastor, Man, Houston

[19] FGC_15, Sales for a temporary staffing company, Man, New York City

[20] FGC_18, COO of anti-sex-trafficking organization, Woman, New York City

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