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## **I know where I'm going: sensemaking and the emergence of calling**

### **Abstract**

This paper draws on the concept of sensemaking to explore the process of the emergence of a calling. Important elements of the calling process are identified: the calling process was initiated when research participants construed unusual events and experiences as cues that made them begin to think that they might have a calling; cues initiated sensemaking, as participants engaged in interpretation and action, to try to clarify what they meant. The socio-material context of the calling domain and participants' identity were shown both to influence and be influenced by participant's sensemaking regarding their calling. The findings highlight that the emergence of a calling is an evolving process of sensemaking, characterized by interactions between extracted cues, interpretation and action, context and identity. While the paper examines a distinctive calling - to be a minister of religion – it seems plausible that the aspects of the calling process that it identifies may also be important in the development of other kinds of callings.

Keywords: Calling; Sensemaking; Career; Vocation

## Introduction

There has been growing research interest in recent years in calling, defined as ‘a transcendent summons...to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented towards demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation’ (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427). Research interest in calling is linked to the view that a calling offers a route to a deeply meaningful and rewarding career; individuals who view their work as a calling have been shown to experience higher levels of satisfaction with and commitment to work and their career (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009) and to be more fulfilled personally (Duffy, Foley, Raque-Bodgan, Reid-Marks, Dik, Castano & Adams, 2012). Callings are also associated with successful career development, via competencies such as career adaptability (Praskova, Hood & Creed, 2014), career confidence (Hirschi, 2011), career decision making self-efficacy (Duffy, Allan & Dik, 2011) and career planning (Hirschi & Hermann, 2013). Despite links between calling and important career outcomes, it has been noted that little is yet known about precisely how individuals come to develop the belief that they have a calling (e.g. Elangovan, Pinder & McLean, 2010; Duffy & Dik, 2013; Zhang, Hirschi, Herrmann, Wei & Zhang, 2017).

It has been suggested that the emergence of a calling results from a deep understanding of oneself that is linked to an urge to find meaning in life, followed by extensive self-reflection and exploration (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Elangovan et al., 2010). Previous empirical studies have identified factors that may prompt people to embark upon the process of discovering their calling. Firstly, certain personal characteristics, for example, a prosocial orientation (Bott, Duffy, Borges, Braun, Jordan & Marino, 2017) and religious affiliation (Hernandez et al., 2011; Goldfarb, 2017) may encourage people to seek to find their calling. Secondly, familiarity and comfort with the

calling domain may foster a sense of calling. Thus, behavioral involvement in the calling domain (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dobrow, 2013; Conklin, 2012) and/or interaction with influential people in the calling domain (Mack, 2007; Bott et al., 2017) may be an important aspect of the calling process. However, while such studies identify factors that may influence the development and emergence of a calling, they tell us little about how and why such factors encourage individuals to believe that they have a calling and consequently choose to build a career based upon it. The aim of this paper is to address this gap in the calling literature.

It has been suggested that, like other kinds of career transitions (Ibarra, 2003), individual recognition and pursuit of a calling may be best understood as a dynamic process (Hernandez, Foley, & Beitin, 2011) that draws a person towards a career based on work that is integral to their identity (Barley, 1989; Ibarra, 2003; Elangovan et al., 2010). Unlike ‘rational’ forms of career decision making (e.g. Singh & Greenhaus, 2004), the process is characterized by the importance ascribed to subjective meanings and interpretations that lead individuals to discover ‘what they are meant to do’ (Thompson & Miller-Perrin, 2003; Conklin, 2012; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). It may be lengthy; the development of a calling is characterized by experiences that often date back to childhood (Conklin, 2012; Hernandez et al., 2011; Dobrow, 2013). It is also seen as being iterative and continuous since, while it may include making a career choice, it ‘extends beyond choice behavior to include the question of how a career, once chosen, might be pursued in a manner that connects work activities to one’s overall sense of purpose’ (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 429). Since the development of a calling has been conceptualized as a process, in this paper we explicitly take a process approach to exploring and understanding it (Langley, 1999). More particularly, we argue that a sensemaking lens may offer a useful means of exploring the unfolding process whereby people come to believe that they have a calling (Weick, 1995).

Following suggestions that such methods could be useful for uncovering important aspects of the calling process (Dik & Duffy, 2009), we explore retrospective accounts of our participants' sensemaking regarding their calling. We examine how individuals narrated the emergence of their calling, how they interpreted and acted upon cues and prompts that directed them towards it and how the socio-material context of the calling domain influenced the unfolding of their calling.

The data used in this paper were gathered from a sample of ministers of religion in the Church of England (C of E). Church of England ministers can have different appellations, such as priest, vicar or rector; for the purposes of standardization, in this paper we refer to them as ministers of religion. Religious vocations are a specific type of calling that involve listening for God's purpose and acting upon it (Thompson & Miller Perrin, 2003; Conway, Clinton, Sturges & Budjanovcanin, 2015). Religious callings are distinctive in two ways. Firstly, they are seen to originate from a call from God, whereas other, more secular callings may not be the result of an external summons, but could be based more on a consuming passion towards the calling domain (Dobrow, 2013). Secondly, because religious callings must be discerned by the church before a minister can enter the ministry, calling precedes working as a minister; other types of calling may potentially emerge after people have been working in an occupation for some time (Hagmaier & Abele, 2012). Nevertheless, we argue both that a sensemaking perspective might be similarly applied to understand the emergence of other kinds of callings and that our findings identify aspects of the calling process that are likely to be important in the development of all types of callings.

### **Sensemaking and the calling process**

Sensemaking is conceptualized as a dynamic process of subjective meaning making that involves individuals striving to understand and make sense of novel or confusing events (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015;

Maitlis & Christianson, 2015; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Vough & Caza, 2017). Central to this process, that ‘unfolds as a sequence’ (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409) is ‘the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing’ (Weick et al. 2005, p. 409). The sensemaking framework has most commonly been used to examine and understand reactions to phenomena that occur at the organizational level, for example organizational change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). However, a recent stream of research has used the framework to explore and describe the sensemaking resulting from individual-level events and experiences, for example, professional mothers giving up work (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015), mothers returning to work after maternity leave (Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke, Liu, Bowers & Conn, 2005), job loss (Zikic & Richardson (2007), failure to obtain promotion (Vough & Caza, 2017), retirement (Vough, Bataille, Noh & Lee, 2015), and how people overcome challenges in enacting their calling (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017).

In this paper, we draw on the notion of sensemaking to understand the emergence of calling, which we refer to here as the calling process. There are two principal reasons for our interest in sensemaking beyond its pertinence for exploring process, sensemaking’s focus on subjective meaning making and the salience of identity work - ‘activities that individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept’ (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1348) - to sensemaking. As discussed in the introduction, the determination to pursue a calling appears to be driven primarily by the development of individuals’ subjective beliefs that this is what they are meant to be doing with their life (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Thompson & Miller Perrin, 2003). The strength of such beliefs can be such that it may sometimes override potential career barriers. For example, in a longitudinal study of musicians, a powerful belief in one’s calling to be a musician was shown to be a stronger influence on pursuing a career as a musician than actual ability (Dobrow Riza & Heller, 2015). A central aspect of sensemaking

is its concern with action based more on what is subjectively credible, rather than objectively accurate (Weick, 1995; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), with the sensemaking process being described as resembling ‘continued redrafting of an emerging story’, rather than rational decision making (Weick et al., 2005, p. 415).

A central dimension of calling is that it draws people towards work that they come to see as integral to their identity (Berg, Grant & Johnson, 2010; Elangovan et al., 2010; Humphreys, Pane Haden & Davis, 2014). This leads them to view their personal and work identities as inseparable (Dobrow, 2004); for them, ‘there is no delineation between what one does and who one is’ (Conklin, 2012, p. 306). Thus, the emergence of calling involves individuals discovering ‘who I am’ (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009, p. 36; Conklin, 2012; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hernandez et al., 2011; Dobrow, 2013). As belief in a calling develops, individuals make sense of who they believe they are meant to be, managing challenges to their self-perception and developing identity (Conklin, 2012); the construction and reconstruction of identity are therefore a fundamental part of the process of ‘discovering’ a calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Elangovan et al., 2010; Dobrow, 2013; Praskova et al., 2014). Identity work has been identified as an important aspect of the sensemaking process, (Weick, 1995; Ibarra, 2003; Vough et al., 2015). Threats and challenges to identity, for example, as a result of organizational change, job loss, entering a new profession or retirement, can trigger sensemaking, as such events disrupt the status quo and may create uncertainty about who one is (Ibarra, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Buzzanell et al., 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2015; Vough & Caza, 2017). As a result, identity work is critical to how the sensemaking process unfolds. When individuals attempt to make sense of equivocal events and experiences, they use their existing identity to try to understand what is happening (Weick et al., 2005; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Future identities, or ‘possible selves’ (Markus and Nurius, 1986), also shape sensemaking, as people draw on notions of who they

could become, exploring and experimenting with new identities, as they try to come to terms with change or uncertainty (Ibarra, 2003; Buzzanell et al., 2005; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015).

In order to explore the calling process, we use Maitlis and Christianson's definition of sensemaking, which conceives it to be 'a process...that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action, and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn' (Maitlis & Christianson, 2015, p. 67). Firstly, cues are seen to drive the process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Weick et al. 2005; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2015; Zikic & Richardson, 2007; Vough & Caza, 2017). Sensemaking is 'triggered' when people extract cues, that is, notice and 'bracket' ambiguous events and experiences that interrupt normality. Such equivocal events can be major, for example, a program of organizational change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004) or minor, for example, simply a feeling 'that something is not quite right' (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p.31; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). A number of papers have suggested that bracketing cues - the awareness and interpretation of significant experiences and events – may be central to the calling process. Bunderson and Thompson (2009), for example, note that the zookeepers in their study identified 'events' that transpired to 'bring them' to their calling of zookeeping. Conklin, in a study of people called to do work related to the natural environment, identifies the role of unexpected events and 'jolts' in clarifying their calling, 'in a flash' making 'everything clear and understood' (Conklin, 2012, p. 304). Dik and Duffy (2009) highlight that knowledge or experience of critical events can contribute to the development of calling, for example, highly visible disasters, such as terrorist attacks or earthquakes, may motivate some people to leave their jobs to come to the aid of victims.

Secondly, sensemaking involves the interplay of action and interpretation (Weick et al., 2005). Since cues disrupt understanding of the world and create uncertainty about how to



act, the sensemaking that follows involves interpretation of cues, in order to create explanation and understanding of equivocal experiences (Vough et al., 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2015). Sensemaking also involves action, as people may act to try to make sense of an equivocal situation (Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2015; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Vough & Caza, 2017). Action may be aimed at clarifying interpretation of extracted cues, as well as testing out ‘provisional understanding’ generated through sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2015, p. 84); it can also alter the environment in which sensemaking is taking place, which may lead to further iterations of sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Interpretation is likely to be an important aspect of the emergence of calling, since individuals have been shown to engage in self-reflection to try to understand what their calling means (Elangovan et al., 2010; Hernandez et al., 2011; Duffy et al., 2012). The calling process also involves action (Elangovan et al., 2010; Dobrow Riza & Heller, 2015). A sense of calling has been shown to motivate people to engage in relevant education (Conklin, 2012) and career development activities (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Elangovan et al., 2010; Hirschi, 2011), as they take steps to act out their calling.

Thirdly, sensemaking does not occur in isolation but is a social activity that is influenced by and influences the environment in which it takes place (Weick 1995; Weick et al. 2005; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2015; Buzzanell et al., 2005). The socio-material context shapes what cues are extracted and how they are interpreted (Weick, et al., 2005). Furthermore, when people engage in sensemaking, their thoughts and behavior are influenced by the ‘actual, imagined, or implied presence of others’ (Allport, 1985, p. 3, cited in Weick, 1995, p. 39). Stakeholders in the sensemaking context, for example, leaders and members of influential groups, can impact the form that sensemaking takes (Maitlis & Christianson, 2015) and co-construct meaning together with those engaged

in sensemaking (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Vough & Caza, 2017). The calling literature has highlighted the importance of socio-material context for those who develop a calling. People with a calling tend to immerse themselves in the calling domain (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009) and show high levels of social comfort with its context (Dobrow, 2013). Family members may have an interest in or work in the domain and encourage an individual's initial attachment to it (Conklin, 2012); later, the individual may develop friendship networks in the calling domain with others who share their interests and passions (Conklin, 2012; Dobrow, 2013). Social actors in the calling domain may influence how a calling unfolds, as they are likely to support and encourage the identification and development of calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Hernandez et al., 2011).

In the study reported in this paper, we focused on how ministers of religion narrated the process of their calling's development, in order to address the broad research question of: 'How do ministers of religion make sense of a calling?' We investigated the type of cues that the ministers of religion extracted, which they believed first signified that they might have a calling. We explored how the ministers tried to make sense of such cues through interpretation and action; we examined how identity work shaped the development of their callings. Finally, we investigated how the socio-material context of the church shaped and was shaped by the sensemaking process associated with the ministers' callings.

### **Method**

The research was conducted using a sample of ministers of religion who worked for the Church of England in full-time, paid roles that involved running one or more parishes; a parish is a district with its own church. The C of E employs around 8,000 full-time stipendiary (paid) ministers of religion, working in 43 dioceses (Archbishops' Council, 2016), in England. Just under a third of full-time stipendiary ministers are female. This research setting was chosen because Church of England ministers have a distinctive neo-

classical calling, a religious vocation to serve God (Conway et al., 2015), that is objectively verified by the church during a lengthy selection process aimed at identifying people who can be recommended for training to be ministers of religion. When individuals believe that they have a calling to ordained ministry, they put themselves forward to undergo this process, which is known as discernment, during which the Church of England verifies their calling and evaluates their suitability for ordination as ministers of religion. The discernment process culminates in a three-day residential assessment by the Bishops' Advisory Panel (BAP) in a candidate's diocese, after which the Bishop of an applicant's diocese makes a final decision about whether or not they should be allowed to train to become an ordained minister.

The study used a sample of 39 stipendiary parish ministers, 20 men and 19 women, selected by Church of England representatives from four of the C of E's dioceses. The research reported in this paper was part of a larger study commissioned by the Church of England's Ministry Division to investigate contemporary ministry careers. To fulfil their own requirements for this study, the Ministry Division wished to recruit similar numbers of male and female paid ministers running parishes in dioceses that were representative of different contexts in which Church of England ministers work. Details of each participant's gender, diocese, age, and date of ordination, plus the pseudonyms that they were given for the purposes of data analysis, are presented in Table 1. As these data indicate, women could not be ordained as ministers of religion in the Church of England until 1994.

Insert Table 1 around here.

Because the aim of the study was to capture participants' retrospective narratives of the process by which they were called to be ministers of religion, a qualitative approach was taken to data gathering and analysis (Cassell & Symon, 1994). In accordance with this approach, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, since they were seen

to be the best means of uncovering rich, personal narratives of events, experiences and feelings relating to the calling process. Each interview was conceived as an opportunity for the participants to reflect on how their calling emerged: an interview schedule was constructed that would encourage the participants to 'shape their own narrative' of this process (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003), thus uncovering accounts of relevant events, experiences and activities up to the point when the participants put themselves forward to have their calling scrutinized by the Church of England's discernment process. Every interview covered the same areas of questioning, but the form it took responded to the content and flow of each participant's personal narrative. Areas of questioning included: 1) How long had you been a Christian when you first believed that you had a calling? 2) How involved in the church were you and in what ways? 3) How did you first know that you had a calling? 4) Can you describe what happened to make you think this? 5) What was the nature of your calling when you first became aware of it? 6) How did you react to your early feelings of calling? 7) How did you pursue your feelings of calling once you became aware of them? 8) What role did other people play in revealing or supporting your calling? 9) How did your feelings of calling evolve after you first became aware of them? 10) What actions did you take to clarify your feelings of calling?

The interviews were conducted by the four authors. Each research participant was interviewed by two researchers for approximately one and a half hours at a Diocesan office or at their church. The objective of using two interviewers to conduct each interview was to increase the internal validity of the data gathered, since this is greatly dependent on the interviewer's skill and scrupulousness (Kvale, 1983). The interviews were taped and transcribed in full. A narrative of the calling process was constructed from the interview data for each participant. These accounts retained the integrity of the participants' own accounts, while drawing on concepts germane to the sensemaking process (Maitlis & Christianson

2015). The aim of constructing each narrative was to highlight participants' subjective meaning making relating to what they regarded as significant events and experiences in the emergence of their calling.

Once the calling narratives had been constructed, the data were subjected to analysis based on the framework approach recommended by Ritchie, Spencer & O'Connor (2003). This approach was taken on the basis that it offers a systematic, flexible and robust approach to analyzing qualitative data (Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid & Redwood, 2013). The first author took primary responsibility for the data analysis, but, in order to ensure the integrity of the data analysis process, the validity of analytical procedures was checked and monitored by the second and third authors. This helped ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, on the basis that they had been involved in conducting the interviews and so had a sound well-grounded appreciation of the data being analyzed (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The first stage of the data analysis process involved sorting and synthesizing the narrative data. In order to do this, the first three authors immersed themselves in the data and identified key themes relating to the calling process, based on their familiarity with the calling and sensemaking literatures. In the second stage of the analysis, the first author constructed an initial thematic framework or 'index'. Once this had been agreed with the second and third authors, this framework was used to index and sort the narrative data. The thematic framework was developed and modified during the indexing process, to accommodate both new themes that emerged and feedback from the second and third authors; categories were added, modified and dropped as necessary. The third stage of analysis was to 'chart' the data, that is, to locate sections of relevant data in the thematic framework. This then allowed the strength and relevance of thematic categories to be examined, and clusters and linkages within the data to be explored. Again, while this process was conducted by the first author, they sought feedback from the second and third authors to test out the soundness of the data analysis, in

order to promote the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In practice, the analytical process did not follow these stages in an entirely linear fashion but was more iterative. In order to promote the rigor of the findings, the calling narratives were repeatedly revisited to confirm the salience of emerging themes and categories relating to the calling process. As the development of thematic framework and the charting process progressed, emerging findings were also compared with relevant literature, in order to aid further clarification and strengthen their rigor (Eisenhardt, 1989).

### **Findings**

Data analysis indicated that the emergence of a calling was not a discrete event but an ongoing and unfolding process of sensemaking, characterized by an interplay between extracted cues (events and experiences that suggested calling), meaning making through action and interpretation, the church context in which the participants' calling occurred and developed, and individuals' evolving identity. To summarize, the participants' identity as Christians and the socio-material context of the calling domain of the Church of England influenced both the kind of cues that were extracted and how they were interpreted and acted upon. In turn, the nature of the cues that were extracted shaped the interpretation and action that ensued, as people strove to make sense of them and to frame possible future selves. Cues changed the context of calling, as they led people to engage more with the calling domain; they also challenged existing identities and gave people a glimpse of who they could become. The interpretation and action that individuals engaged in, together with their evolving identity, altered the context of their developing calling; it highlighted them as people who looked like they might have a calling, which led to the manifestation of further cues, as stakeholders in the calling domain became increasingly inclined to see signs of calling in them. Interpretation and action, together with the church context, shaped the development of an identity based on calling, as people made sense of who they believed that they were

‘meant to be’ and tested out their new identity. The ongoing reciprocal interplay between elements of the sensemaking process is illustrated in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 here.

**‘It’s as though a seed is planted under the ground’: Cues trigger thoughts of calling**

The first stage in the participants’ narrative of calling was an initial cue – a dramatic experience, a powerful emotion, an unexpected prompting or a persistent feeling - that made them begin to think that they might have a religious calling. Data analysis distinguished three different types of cue that could signal the beginning of the process of acknowledging and pursuing a calling; the type of cue that first prompted a person to think about whether they had a calling influenced the sensemaking process that ensued.

For half of the participants (19), the initial prompt to think about calling took the form of an unexpected, emotionally charged and transformative experience that revealed to them ‘that God wanted them to do something’. Examples of transformative incidents included compelling coincidences, the reading of a book or text and the onset of sudden, powerful emotions. Fiona was deeply affected by ‘a very powerful experience of God’ when she was 18: ‘I sort of just was gripped by this passion...I mean I’d always been fairly keen, but this was a huge experience.’ The incident visibly changed Fiona: ‘Somebody asked me if I’d got a new boyfriend, my mum thought I was on drugs.’ Often, such profound experiences occurred during a church service, particularly on important occasions, such as a confirmation ceremony. At Cassie’s confirmation ceremony (when she was 11 years’ old) she ‘knew immediately that God wanted me in his service, in the service of the church... I didn’t know really what that looked like, you don’t when you’re 11, all I thought about was that it was serving God.’ Five people believed that they had heard an actual voice revealing their calling to them. Fred was 13 and filling in a form that indicated what subjects he would study at school, when he thought that he received ‘a very clear message from God’ telling him that he

was going to 'be a vicar' that has 'shaped (his) life ever since': 'The only two boxes that I wanted to tick on the form were Art and Religious Education, and I asked myself the question as I sat there on my bed, if that's my only interest really, art and RE, what does that mean I'm going to do? And a voice came back, and said you're going to be a vicar. It sounded like my voice but it wasn't me.' As the quotations above indicate, some people had profound and transformative experiences of this kind when they were very young: nine members of this group were still at school and a further four at university when they were first prompted in this way to think that they had a religious calling; their young age meant that eight of this group did not initially understand exactly what their calling meant.

The second type of cue, identified by 11 people, was not a single profound experience but rather a disquieting and unsettling 'inner feeling', which 'wouldn't go away', that they might have a religious calling. While such feelings were sometimes distrusted early on, they were characterized as being persistent; as such, they were deemed difficult to ignore, 'a nagging voice' that did not disappear but 'niggled and niggled', and 'took root', as people tried to make sense of what they meant. Over time, such perturbing thoughts and feelings developed into a strong belief in a calling, as Neil describes: 'The calling came gradually, over a year or two...I came to a powerful conviction, a feeling in me that this was where I would feel comfortable.' This kind of cue was often specifically contrasted, as Nina does here, with the kind of dramatic revelation of calling described earlier: 'I was disappointed there was no voices. No writing on the wall. Nothing necessarily that stirred in my heart, other than, actually, I think this was what I was meant to be doing.'

The third type of cue identified was different, in that it originated from another person. For nine participants, the trigger that made them start to think about whether they had a religious calling took the form of other people unexpectedly suggesting this to them, as Iris describes here: 'The vicar of my church one day said to me had I thought about some



form of full time or part time ministry? And it hadn't crossed my mind.' All the people in this group were active Christians and, like Iris, this suggestion was typically made to them by the minister of the church that they attended. This type of cue was not immediately transformative; indeed, such advice was often initially rejected or dismissed as 'absurd'. Julian was typical, in that his initial feelings were that 'this couldn't possibly be true, 20-year olds working in a bank don't get asked to consider becoming a priest'. As Julian's quote suggests, the reason why prompting by others was often initially rejected was that it directly challenged people's existing identity. As discussed below, such identity issues were especially marked for women. When Rachel's calling was pointed out to her by the minister of the church that she attended, 'I just laughed. I mean, I still had a baby in arms, I was still breast-feeding, and it was like, no way, vicars don't look like me.' For the women in this group, like Rachel, this typically led to 'a long process' of making sense of this type of cue and acknowledge their calling, as discussed below.

#### **'It was a case of working it out': interpreting and acting upon extracted cues**

The emotions, thoughts and incidents that led people to begin to consider that they might have a religious calling were followed by attempts to clarify what their experiences signified and how they should react to them. Individuals tried to understand and accept what their incipient calling meant through 'self-exploration and self-awareness', drawing on their Christian beliefs to engage in prayer, the study of bible texts and meditation: 'I've learned over the years to listen to my conscience, I think that's how God speaks to me. The more you are soaked in prayer and the more time you spend with God, the more you are tuned in and therefore the more likely you are to have the right intuition.' The participants' identity as active Christians undoubtedly encouraged them to interpret their experiences as signs of calling and clarify 'what God wanted' from them: 'It felt like God had showed me something in a big way.' This kind of introspective interpretation was central to the sensemaking of

those whose calling began as a persistent inner feeling - 'it was in my thoughts for years'. It was also important to those whose calling was first pointed out to them by other people – 'one aspect while I was wrestling with this was the study of scripture and prayer' – as they struggled to come to terms with being singled out in this way.

Nevertheless, most people whose initial prompting was internal did not rely on their own feelings alone to confirm that they had a calling but also turned to other people, usually in the calling domain, to get help in interpreting their belief that they might have a calling. Often, they sought advice from the minister of their own parish, as Don describes here: 'I'd got this feeling that actually I might be called to be a vicar...and I can remember talking to the vicar of the local parish church where I was a member...and his response was "that's brilliant because we (him and his wife), we've been talking about it for the last few months and wondering when you were going to talk to us about it"'. As Don suggests, existing ministers were instrumental in shaping the sense individuals made of calling prompts because part of their role was to discern and encourage calling in others. Seeking the confirmation and support of others was particularly central to the sensemaking of those participants whose cue had instantly led them to believe that they were called to be a minister of religion, as they sought to make sure that they were not just 'having a wild moment'. Larry was at university when 'quite suddenly I had this sense that God was calling me to get ordained...it was a surprise, and I initially dismissed it as an adolescent fantasy...but I talked to a couple of people I respected and they thought it might well be right, so I held it there.'

Sometimes, however, people did not actively seek the advice of others but, following an initial cue, interpreted subsequent unprompted suggestions by other people that they might have a calling as further confirmation of it. Ed was trying to work out whether to act on a feeling he was experiencing that he might have a calling to be a minister of religion, when 'at one of the interminable parties that we had as a teenagers, one of my friends said to me "my

mum knows what you're going to do" - I said, well, that's clever because I haven't told anybody yet - "you're going to be a priest". While this incident could have been dismissed as a coincidence, Ed concluded that 'somebody's trying to tell me something here' and as a result 'went ahead' to seek ordination. If this unsolicited prompting came from a stranger, it acted as a more powerful cue: Kate's calling had been 'pointed out' to her numerous times but it was only when she was questioned about it by a Roman Catholic priest who came to visit her church that she began to consider it seriously: 'With people I knew I felt like I could say it's just because I'm nice to you, you know me, I'm safe. And I was able to explain it away. But when a man who I'd never met said that to me...it made me think, okay, you have to explore it.'

Individuals took other forms of action to make sense of their calling. This was especially true of those whose calling had been revealed to them in a transformative experience but who did not fully understand what it meant. Some people sought specific clarification by attending Church of England events: Bob, for example, who was not a Christian when he first came to believe that he might have a religious calling, took a course to find out about Christianity and was baptized at the end of it. The most important type of action that members of this group, including Bob, took was to engage in education in the calling domain, by studying religion. Young people who had been led by a transformative experience to believe that God was calling them commonly went on to study theology at university. Fiona changed her main subject of study from history to theology once she arrived at university, which she described as 'the first step of going to serve God'. Studying religion at university not only demonstrated a commitment to a calling but also enabled people to explore in depth and in an informed manner about what a religious calling might mean for them. Fiona identified that her understanding of her calling was shaped by one of her university tutors and in particular by an essay that Fiona wrote for her in her final year at

university; this led her ‘to begin to understand misogyny and tradition, and to try to work out quite where I did fit in with all of that’. Studying religion also influenced how other people viewed the participants. This could lead to the emergence of further cues, as stakeholders in the calling domain were more likely to prompt to individuals who were deeply immersed in it to consider whether they might have a calling. Clive suddenly had an experience of religious calling at a Christian event when he was a student. After he graduated he decided to study part-time at bible college, a context where other people also began to suggest that he might have a calling to be a minister of religion: ‘As the year went on, more and more people started to come to me, saying “have you thought about ministry?”’ These further cues were interpreted by Clive as confirmation of his calling: ‘Of course when that keeps happening you begin to think well maybe I’ve got to listen.’

Individuals took action not just to help them deepen understanding of their calling but also to test out their evolving identity. Everyone except Bob was an active church member when they first started to consider whether they might have a calling. One response to a cue that signified a religious calling was to become even more engaged in the calling domain. Some people experimented by taking on leadership roles in their local church on a voluntary basis, as Simone describes: ‘I started doing Sunday school, helping create services and things like that.’ Other people took on paid work roles in other churches, cathedrals or Christian organizations as they explored their calling. This kind of action shaped people’s ongoing sensemaking and its outcomes; it transformed the context in which sensemaking occurred, as people began to view themselves in a different way. Fiona first thought her calling was to be a missionary, so she went to visit her sister, who was working as a volunteer in Nigeria, ‘but I’d been there 24 hours and thought, no, this isn’t it, I hated the heat, it would have been awful.’ Fiona next tested out her calling through ‘leadership opportunities’ in the Christian Union at her university, which led to her to engage in further sensemaking, as she realized

that Christian leadership ‘just suited me: I can lead bible study, I can do a talk, I can lead worship... and it was a good fit for what I could do and what I felt’.

**‘The church, like a comfortable cloak, sat around me’: the role of context in the calling process**

While participants described the experiences that initially triggered the calling process for them as ‘a shock’, ‘a surprise’ or ‘a bolt from the blue’, perhaps such experiences should not have been so surprising because of the context in which they occurred; as Arnold put it, ‘the roots lay deep’. All but two of the participants had had a Christian upbringing. Like Gary, they noted how they had been actively engaged in the church milieu from an early age, taking part in church services, singing in the church choir and belonging to church youth groups and uniformed organizations, such as the Scouts, Brownies and Guides: ‘I’ve always been to church, my parents were both practicing Christians, my experience of life has had God placed at the heart of it. And so, from a very early age I was involved in playing a part in the way that church life operated.’ For some, like Cassie, an interest in the Church was more akin to an obsessive passion, even at a young age: ‘It actually made me quite an odd cookie... if I was given the choice to go and sit round the back of the churchyard and drink cider or be in the church cleaning the brass and setting out the booklets, I’d choose to be in church, quite genuinely.’ People acknowledged, as Clive does here, that having a Christian upbringing was a crucial factor in the development of their calling: ‘I think there are marker posts on the journey. So, I would say that the fact that I was brought up in a Christian family was hugely important...in a sense, the church has always been part of my background.’

At the time that they were first prompted to think about whether they might have a calling, all but one of the participants were devout and active Christians, with high levels of participation in church activities. They attended church services regularly, and some, like Bea quoted below, were involved in running their local church through parish administration and pastoral work: ‘I was on the Parochial Church Council, I was Church Warden...so I think

even then I was always very involved in the church, I wasn't just an ordinary member, if you know what I mean.' The church environment encouraged people to think about callings and influenced their evolving identity. There was an expectation, especially of men, that some of them would be called to be ministers of religion: 'There was a poster on the back of the church door which I saw every time I left. Of a very deliberately, very ordinary looking man, looking over his shoulder with a sort of puzzled expression on his face, and the caption underneath: Who - me?' People knew about other people's experiences of calling and were sometimes invited to discover their own, as Steve describes here: 'I can trace it back to being in the youth fellowship in my home church, and a gentleman came and spoke to us...he really issued the challenge not only about serving God, but also thinking about the possibility of maybe even ordained ministry as that calling.'

The church context, together with participants' faith and identity as active Christians, influenced what kind of cues they extracted, how they interpreted and acted upon them, and how they reconstructed their identity in the sensemaking that followed. As Christians, they were primed to 'listen to what God wants' through prayer and in church services and to interpret powerful and persistent feelings as signs of calling. The kind of internal cues that suggested to individuals that they might have a calling, for example, strong emotions experienced during a church service, reflected their Christian beliefs and immersion in the church environment. Lucy, for example, wondered whether 'it was just because I was involved in churchy type things' that, at the age of 18, she heard 'a very clear voice' saying 'one day I want you to work in the church'. The group of people whose initial cue to consider calling came from other people, while expressing initial shock and disbelief at the suggestion, admitted that their behavior as Christians and their deep involvement in church life could have encouraged others to suggest to them that they might have a calling.

Individuals' identity as active Christians and the church environment also influenced the kind of sensemaking that they engaged in to interpret and act upon the cues that they extracted. As discussed above, they relied on Christian activities such as prayer and reading the bible to help them interpret what their incipient calling meant. They engaged in religious studies, became more involved in their church and other Christian organizations and in particular sought advice from other people in the church as they tried to make sense of cues that pointed to a calling. The church environment in turn provided support and encouragement from other people, in particular from ordained ministers. Not only were ordained ministers of religion inclined to confirm signs of calling in others, but they were also important role models for the participants. This was especially important for women, for whom making sense of a future identity as a minister of religion was more difficult. For Iris, 'the clinching thing' in making sense of her calling was shadowing a woman minister of religion in Uganda: 'At the end of that week I knew I was priest shaped... could see myself in that role.' Stakeholders in the Christian context in which callings unfolded therefore helped to shape the sensemaking process.

As discussed in the previous section, the actions that individuals took to explore their potential calling by testing their evolving identity altered the environment in which their calling unfolded. Trying out a 'possible self' through greater involvement in church organizations and activities or by studying religion created a context that encouraged people to make sense of who they could become; it also made other people more likely to suggest to them that they might have a calling. Tony suddenly became aware that he had a religious calling during a church service when he was 12 but did not feel able to act upon it until, as a young man, he took the step of going to work for the Christian organization, YMCA. There a further cue prompted him, when a co-worker told him 'you should be a vicar, you know'.

Tony then ‘knew he had to do something about it...and, to cut a long story short, was accepted for training’.

### **‘The person I’m meant to be’: evolving identity in the calling process**

As described above, the participants drew on their identity as Christians to make sense of their calling. Nevertheless, because becoming a minister of religion was seen to ‘make you different’ from other people in secular occupations, a calling to the ministry potentially posed a special kind of challenge to individuals’ secular identity and demanded identity work that was sometimes difficult even for Christians, as individuals tried to make sense of what it would mean to be a minister of religion. It challenged people’s professional identity - ‘I was all set to be an engineer’ - and their personal identity - ‘I didn’t really see that that was me’. Amy described how, when her calling was revealed to her, it felt like she ‘was standing on a trapdoor’. ‘If I pulled the handle, I wouldn’t stop falling and it would change my life. You know, I worked, I had a life and friends, and I knew that, if I pursued it, it would change everything in my life.’ Making sense of a future identity as a minister of religion was more difficult for women like Amy than it was for men. At the time that the research was conducted the ordination of women as Church of England ministers had only been possible for 20 years: ministry was still viewed as a masculinized profession and women found it harder to imagine becoming a minister: ‘it didn’t feel quite right felt, I felt like a square peg in a round hole’. The calling process for them was often lengthy and complex - ‘it was quite a difficult journey, you feel as if you’ve been turned inside out’ - and women looked for the support of others as they tentatively tested out a possible new identity as a minister of religion: Simone, for example, asked her friends ‘what would you think if I had a collar round my neck?’

Despite the challenges to identity that a calling to be a minister of religion posed, the calling process was seen ultimately to reveal to people a pre-ordained destiny; it helped



people to uncover what they believed was a latent identity waiting to be discovered. Here Cassie traces manifestations of her identity as a minister of religion back to her childhood: ‘As a Brownie, people would ask me to pray for them, so there’s always been something about me. I’m now identified as a priest, but actually it’s not changed that much really.’ Even if people were initially uncomfortable with the idea of becoming a minister of religion, this did not detract from their belief that it was ‘what they were meant to do’. When Jenny began to consider whether she might have a calling to the ministry her first reaction was ‘what a stupid idea’; nevertheless, she ‘pursued it because I had to. I always had a strong sense that this is what I should be doing, this is where I should be going’. As she suggests, because the calling process was seen to enlighten people about who they really were and what they were ‘meant to be doing’, they saw its unveiling as inevitable and unstoppable. Jenny describes how this felt: ‘This was what God was calling me to do, even though it was a bit odd and extremely inconvenient, this was where I was travelling. And I had this fascinating image, of being on one of these moving walk ways at an airport and I was just slowly trundling along and I was going to continually slowly keep trundling along until I got there.’ The ineluctability of the calling process was commonly described in terms of ‘doors opening’, without any apparent personal effort or even against the odds, as Fred recounts here: ‘Every step of the way when I thought maybe God’s closed this door on ordination, behold, another door would open...and I’m talking about major things like failing RE (Religious Education) A level. I thought, well, it’s door closed to theology, which was the degree I wanted to do. But lo and behold the college said, no, we’ll have you anyway. It was plainly obvious this was what I was meant to do with my life.’

**‘I needed to be patient for it to fully mature’: the unfolding of the calling process**

Participants described the process of making sense of their calling as ‘a journey’ of intuition, exploration and finally commitment. As the findings suggest, this journey began

long before individuals first experienced intimations that they might have a religious calling: while everyone identified a specific incident or feeling that they believed was the inception of their calling, this experience was part of an ongoing process of participation in Christianity and church activities that in most cases dated back to childhood. At the time that they first became aware of their calling, some of the participants were already working for the church in paid roles, such as parish administration, where they could be ‘doing nearly everything the vicar was doing’, in terms of management of a parish. Gillian had given up her job as a lawyer to work as a parish administrator, ‘so that was a sort of turning point, although I didn’t see it like that at the time’. For other people, extraction of cues that they interpreted as signs of calling was preceded by a period of reflection about what they ‘should be doing’ with their life or during which they had been ‘asking God questions about how I could serve him and what he wanted from me’. Nor did the journey end once people had realized their calling through ordination as ministers of religion. People looked for further cues and signs to show them how their calling should develop through the roles that they took on in the church once they were ordained, as Emily explains here: ‘In parish ministry you could be called to do lots of different things... So, I think, if you're open to what God might be calling you to do, you could go anywhere really...I don't know what I would be doing this time next year.’

The calling process unfolded in different ways for each participant. For some of those who immediately understood their initial cue to mean that they were called to be a minister of religion and accepted this, the process could be relatively short: such people were generally happy to put themselves forward to undergo the Church of England’s discernment process, once other people had confirmed the initial sense that they made of their calling experience. For other people, the process of their calling emerging was more complicated, even if they felt certain in their belief that they had a calling. Confirmation of this was not always forthcoming; when participants approached people, such as the minister of their parish, to

discuss their calling they were sometimes told to 'go away and live a bit' or 'wait a while', especially if they were very young. Tony 'spoke to people' when he first experienced a sense of calling, 'and the advice was... don't just go from school to university to a theological college or whatever and then into a parish. So, I did what I did what I was told'. Three of the participants, Don, Helen and Ivor, were initially rejected for ordination by the Church of England. Ivor's calling process involved powerful cues, including hearing voices during a mountain retreat and dreaming of church buildings; he never doubted his belief that he had been 'called to ministry from age 30. However, he failed to be selected for ordination at his first attempt and finally succeeded nearly 30 years later, when he was prompted by a further cue to apply once more to be ordained.

For participants who were prompted by other people or whose initial cue took the form of a growing feeling, the calling process was often 'slow' and 'long', 'a great, big heart-searching trail'. It involved a sequence of cues, and protracted sensemaking over years, as they struggled to 'work out what it really was about'. This was especially true for women, both because they found it more challenging to assume the identity of a minister of religion and because their beliefs that they had a religious calling were sometimes dismissed, belittled or even impossible to put into practice. Three of the women experienced powerful cues that evoked religious calling long before women could be ordained as ministers of religion. In order to enact their calling, Polly and Bea both became nuns, but dropped out of convent life after a short time: 'I knew that God wanted me to do something, but it obviously wasn't that.' When Cassie felt that she was called at the age of 11, she discussed this with her parish minister, who responded by giving her 'lots of jobs within the church'. Cassie's belief that she had a religious calling persisted and she told a careers advisor at secondary school that she wanted to be a minister of religion when she grew up. 'The careers advisor really slapped me down and made me feel a fool, he said to me don't be stupid, you've just sat there and

thought about the one thing a girl can't do.' Cassie then 'kind of buried' her thoughts of calling until she wanted to go back to work after having a family, when 'it came back very strongly... God kept, prodding and prodding and prodding.' Cassie was eventually ordained over 30 years after her initial calling cue. 'I finally spoke to the vicar, expecting that it wouldn't look right. But every door I pushed on just opened and it was a very, very straightforward path.'

### **Discussion**

Using data gathered from a sample of 39 Church of England ministers, this paper has explored the sensemaking that individuals engage in when they believe that they may have a calling to become a minister of religion. In taking this approach to studying the emergence of calling, we have responded to calls for studies that use retrospective methods to provide a better understanding of this (Dik & Duffy, 2009). In drawing on participants' narrative accounts of their sensemaking regarding their calling, our approach emphasizes the significance of individuals' subjective meanings and interpretations in discovering 'what they are meant to do' (Thompson & Miller-Perrin, 2003; Conklin, 2012; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009) and 'who I am' (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Conklin, 2012; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hernandez et al., 2011; Dobrow, 2013); it accentuates that the discovery and enactment of calling may be best conceptualized as a dynamic process (Hernandez et al., 2011; Dobrow, 2013).

The chief contribution of this study is to elucidate the calling process, that is, how and why callings, in the case of our participants to be ministers of religion, emerge (Langley, 1999). Elucidating the process of the emergence of calling is important because callings are linked to rewarding careers and successful career development (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Praskova et al., 2014). Previous research has explored factors that may be linked to emergence of a calling, such as personal characteristics (e.g. Bott et al., 2017; Hernandez et

al., 2011) and behavioral involvement in the calling domain (e.g. Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dobrow, 2013; Mack, 2007). Nevertheless, such factors appear to give only a partial, one-dimensional and static picture of what precipitates the emergence of a calling; little was previously known about how and why such factors encourage individuals to arrive at the belief that they have a calling. Our paper challenges the notion that exploring antecedents alone can ever provide full knowledge of what leads people to come to the belief that they have a calling. By using a sensemaking lens, we show that the development of calling, like other kinds of career transitions (Ibarra, 2003), is a complex, dynamic experience, which is not necessarily linear or largely informed by rational decision-making. In brief, our contribution transcends questions of what drives the development of a calling to show how a calling emerges, in terms of the cues that individuals extract and their interpretation of them and why it may emerge, encouraged by the socio-material context of the calling domain and aspects of an individual's identity.

Reference to dimensions of sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2015) has allowed us to contribute to the calling literature by identifying important elements of the process of development of calling. Firstly, central to the participants' narratives was the extraction of events, experiences and feelings as cues that made them begin to think that they might have a calling (Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2015; Vough & Caza, 2017). Three different kinds of cues were identified; the type of cue that was extracted was important not just because, from the participants' perspective, it signaled how the calling process started but also because this had an influence on how the process subsequently unfolded. While this study investigates the calling to be a minister of religion, previous research suggests that the extraction of cues from unexpected and transformative events may be linked to the process of development of calling in other domains, for example zookeeping and environmental work, as well (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Conklin, 2012.) Secondly, cues

instigated sensemaking through interpretation and action, as participants strove to understand whether their calling was substantial and, if so, what that might mean for them (Maitlis & Christianson, 2015; Vough et al., 2015). Some cues were more likely to prompt internal reflection as a means of interpretation, but participants also took action to try make sense of the cue that they had extracted, by discussing their experience with stakeholders in the calling domain, studying religion and by testing out possible ‘future selves’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Again, while this study focuses on a distinctive sample, self-reflection and action, such as engaging in education and career development activities, have also been previously linked to the development of callings in other domains (e.g. Conklin, 2012; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Hirschi, 2011). Thirdly, the participants’ sensemaking did not take place in isolation but was both influenced by and influenced the socio-material context in which it occurred (Weick at al., 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2015; Buzzanell et al., 2005). The participants’ involvement in the church and their Christian faith shaped the cues that they extracted and how they interpreted them; they looked to stakeholders in the calling domain to co-construct meaning as they tried to make sense of the cues that they extracted (Maitlis & Christianson, 2015; Buzzanell et al., 2005). The actions that they took as part of their sensemaking in turn reshaped the socio-material context, which became more amenable to their calling; this in turn could lead to the extraction of further cues. Once again, while this research concerns a specific type of calling, previous studies have signaled the potential importance of the socio-material context, as well as social actors in the calling domain, for the development of other types of calling; people with callings to be zookeepers, musicians and environmental workers have been shown to immerse themselves in the calling domain, showing high levels of social comfort with it and building friendship networks within it (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dobrow, 2013; Conklin, 2012).

Because the calling process involves people developing an identity based on their calling, a chief reason for choosing to employ a sensemaking lens to explore narratives of calling was the salience of identity work in sensemaking (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Weick et al., 2005); when trying to make sense of equivocal experiences, individuals draw on both their existing identity and future ‘possible selves’, as they reconstruct their identity (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ibarra, 2003; Vough & Caza, 2017; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). Even though a calling ultimately revealed what participants believed they were ‘meant to do’, being a minister of religion was seen to ‘make you different’, so the calling process sometimes demanded difficult identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1978), especially for women. There was also interplay between current and future selves in this process: participants’ identity as active Christians was an important influence on their sensemaking, in terms of the kind of cues that they extracted, the activities that they engaged in to make sense of these cues and how they constructed their new identity as ministers of religion. Since the emergence of calling involves individuals discovering ‘who I am’ (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009, p. 36), the construction and reconstruction of identity are likely to be crucial for the development of all types of calling, not just a calling to be a minister of religion (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Dik & Duffy, 2009, Praskova et al., 2015).

While reference to the sensemaking lens allows the paper to contribute to the calling literature by identifying elements of the calling process, its contribution goes beyond this. The study that it reports also uncovered complex interactions and interrelationships between these elements, as well as the iterative nature of calling. We believe that such interactions and interrelationships are at the heart of the calling process, as our findings emphasize the mutability and reflexivity of the elements that comprise it, such as identity, action and context, which affect and are affected by each other as the calling process unfolds. For example, the participants’ identity and the socio-material context of the calling domain

influenced both the kind of cues that they extracted and how they interpreted and acted upon them. Extracted cues in turn altered the socio-material context of calling and challenged existing identities, as they gave people a glimpse of future selves. The interpretation of cues and action that individuals took to clarify them also changed the socio-material context of calling, which in turn could lead to the extraction of further cues. The process of making sense of a calling was not necessarily linear: some participants engaged in protracted iterations of sensemaking, involving a sequence of cues and cycles of interpretation and action, as they struggled to acknowledge their calling over a long period of time. While this study does not explore how callings are actually enacted, it seems likely that iterations of sensemaking may continue after people have acknowledged their calling, as they try to work out how to act them out successfully (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017).

This is the first paper to use the sensemaking framework to explore the emergence of calling. We took this approach because we were interested in uncovering the calling process (Langley, 1999; Weick, 1995). We believed that the type of events and experiences that led people to consider whether or not they might have a calling would be likely to trigger a process of sensemaking, as they tried to work out what their experiences meant and how they should act upon them (Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2015; Vough & Caza, 2017). The findings show that the sensemaking perspective does have utility for understanding the process of the emergence of a calling to be a minister of religion. While we acknowledge that religious ministry is a unique type of calling, based on a vocation to serve God (Conway et al., 2015), we believe that taking a sensemaking perspective could be a useful approach to understanding the process of emergence of other callings as well. As we discuss above, previous research suggests that the elements of making sense of an incipient calling identified here may be important in other calling domains (e.g. Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Conklin, 2012; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Dobrow, 2013). As we highlight



in the previous paragraph, taking a sensemaking perspective may also be useful for understanding processes related to calling enactment, which are not yet fully understood (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Dobrow, 2013; Conway et al., 2015; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017).

### **Limitations and future research directions**

The findings reported in this paper are subject to limitations that result from the study design, the research methods used and the data gathered. Firstly, the research used only qualitative methods; other research methods, for example, a tracking study that captures the development of calling in real-time rather than retrospectively, might be useful for gaining further insights in to the calling process. Secondly, only one type of calling was explored; it is possible that the calling process may vary for different kinds of calling. As noted in the introduction, religious callings originate from a call from God, whereas other, more secular callings may be based more on a consuming passion towards the calling domain (Dobrow, 2013). Furthermore, because religious callings must be discerned by the church before a minister can enter the occupation, calling precedes working as a minister, whereas other types of calling may emerge after people have been working in an occupation for some time (Hagmaier & Abele, 2012). Such differences may potentially affect the calling process. Thirdly, all of the participants had been able to pursue their calling successfully; the sensemaking process may be different for people who believe that they are called but find themselves unable to follow their calling, decide that they do not want to pursue it or abandon it some years into their career. Further research, taking a sensemaking approach with different samples, as well as other research methods, is needed to explore further how callings emerge (or, in the case of those who fail to pursue an incipient calling, fail to emerge) across a range of occupations.

### **Practical implications**

Finally, since callings are seen to offer a route to a meaningful and rewarding career, it is important to acknowledge the practical implications of the findings. The findings show that people can play a significant role in shaping the development of their calling. For individuals who are trying to decide whether to pursue a calling or not, it may be useful to gain work experience in the calling domain, to engage in activities that foster self-exploration and self-awareness, and to discuss their thoughts with people with knowledge of the calling domain. Undertaking relevant training and education may also deepen understanding of a calling.

In addition, the findings show that other people can have a positive (or negative) influence on the development of a calling. Those who are already pursuing a calling are shown to act as role models and as advisers who can identify or confirm the existence of a calling. Thus, stakeholders in the calling domain have an essential role to play in supporting individuals who may have a calling, through activities such as mentoring, counselling and job shadowing. It is also important for human resource practitioners, such as career counsellors, to understand how they might foster the development of callings, for example, by encouraging people to engage in relevant self-exploration and education.

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**Table 1: Participants' pseudonyms, gender, diocese, age and date of ordination**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Diocese</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Date of Ordination</b>
Simone	F	A	50	2007
Rachel	F	A	46	2010
Steve	M	A	57	1981
Walt	M	A	64	1976
Vic	M	A	60	1984
Patrick	M	A	47	1993
Neil	M	A	68	1972
Otto	M	A	57	1988
Reg	M	A	49	2004
Tony	M	A	57	1987
Polly	F	B	69	1994
Mary	F	B	56	2005
Lucy	F	B	62	1995
Nina	F	B	49	1994
Olivia	F	B	61	1994
Milo	M	B	63	1976
Larry	M	B	63	1976
Kevin	M	B	59	1978
Julian	M	B	53	2001
Tracey	F	C	63	2007
Kate	F	C	39	2007
Jenny	F	C	59	2002
Iris	F	C	54	2004
Helen	F	C	45	2003
Fred	M	C	40	1998
Ed	M	C	61	1975
Gary	M	C	47	1996
Ivor	M	C	63	2004
Gillian	F	D	52	2009
Emily	F	D	56	2009
Dot	F	D	60	1998
Bea	F	D	68	2002
Fiona	F	D	48	1994
Amy	F	D	56	2002
Cassie	F	D	51	2007
Clive	M	D	57	1986
Bob	M	D	37	2003
Arnold	M	D	52	1991
Don	M	D	54	2000

**Figure 1: A model of sensemaking during the calling process**

