



Called to Serve: Exploring Servant, Authentic, and Relational Leadership Through the Narrative Journey of Pastor Rose

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Abstract

Background: Women leaders in faith-based organizations continue to navigate structural, cultural, and organizational barriers that still today challenge traditional expectations of religious leadership. **Objectives:** This study explores the leadership journey of Pastor Rose Sparks through the lens of servant, authentic, and relational leadership theories, highlighting her leadership identity, calling, resilience, and relational experience within both organizational and global leadership frameworks through a faith-based context. **Methods/Approach:** Using a qualitative narrative research design, this study explores interview-based data from Pastor Rose Sparks to gain practical insights into how lived experience, faith, organizational culture, and gender-related expectations contributed to the development of her core ideology and faith-based leadership identity. **Results:** This study narrative study identifies reoccurring themes of calling, resilience, values-based decision-making, relational engagement, and resistance to gendered leadership expectations beyond the traditional religious framework outlined by religious denominations. These themes highlight connections between Pastor Rose's lived experience and servant, authentic and relational leadership theories. **Conclusions:** This narrative-based research study further contributes to global and organizational leadership cultures by demonstrating how faith-based leadership can reflect servant and values-driven principles that are transferable across diverse organization and cultural contexts, while highlighting gender-related barriers that continue to exist in today's leadership practices.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Global Leadership, Faith-Based Leadership, Women in Leadership, Narrative Analysis, Core-Ideology

Paper type: Research article

Introduction

Across traditions and continents rooted in faith, women who sense a call to religious leadership encounter a profoundly consistent set of barriers: patriarchal institutional structures, theological interpretations that hinder authority and promote cultural expectations that leadership belongs to men. From faith-based congregations deep within American roots to Catholic parishes in the hillsides of Europe, Anglican dioceses in sub-Saharan Africa, and Buddhist communities across Southeast Asia, women navigating spiritual leadership roles face challenges that are both deeply local, and yet globally shared.

In today's world, leadership is often defined as the ability to demonstrate authority and power in a manner that inspires influence and organizational outcomes. However, for many women, especially those who have chosen to root their identity into their faith, leadership is not just grounded in a positional power or a hierarchy of command but is a calling that is tied to humility and service.

This narrative study explores the story of Pastor Rose Sparks, a female pastor whose journey into spiritual leadership defies the traditional boundaries of Christian cultures while also embodying timeless truths to an internal walk of faith. Her leadership style is best understood through the lens of Robert Greenleaf's Servant Leadership Theory, which defines a servant leader as one who prioritizes the growth and well-being of others over personal ambition, highlighting the importance of selflessly giving of yourself to meet the needs of others for the good of those around you (Greenleaf, 1977). Larry Spears (1998) later expanded upon Greenleaf's theory to include that Servant Leadership embodies ten characteristic traits, including listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Both Greenleaf and Spears noted servant leadership as an outward act of behavior that reveals a person's inner reflections. This perspective helps to demonstrate how servant leadership emerges from a spiritual conviction that is defined by Greenleaf (1977) and Spears (1998) as a servant-first orientation, and what Pastor Rose identifies as her calling, interpreted through a faith-based lens. This framework helps define Christian women like Pastor Rose Sparks, whose leadership emerges not from ambition, but a calling she describes as a sacred desire rooted in meeting the needs of others, far beyond her own understanding.

Pastor Rose's leadership does not only rest on the foundation of service. Her journey also reflects the principles of Authentic Leadership Theory, which highlights self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, and relational transparency (Walumbwa et al., 2008). From an early age, Pastor Rose recognized a spiritual "tugging" that caused her to question her set expectations of her teachings and caused her to lean into an internal basis of trust. Her story is deeply rooted in inner conviction and outward consistency, both trademarks of an authentic leader. Furthermore, as her journey continued to unfold, her internal desire to build relevant and genuine relationships within her calling reflects Relational Leadership Theory, which highlights inclusive, purposeful, and ethical leadership through relationship building (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Within faith-based contexts, often Christian women do not see servant leadership as a model or a framework that they are required to follow; instead, it reflects servant leadership that emerges through a deeply internalized desire to care for others,

prioritizing the well-being of those being served and building relationship grounded in trust (Obi et al., 2021). This reflects what individuals within faith traditions define as a divinely inspired purpose, and what servant leadership theory defines as a natural impulse to serve before seeking recognition or authority. Their leadership, often unrecognized by themselves, flows from an inner conviction rather than a desire for authority. Like many servant leaders, they do not see themselves as leaders at all, but as simply individuals who are fulfilling their divine purpose, rooted in a belief that their lives are being led by a specific purpose and calling, as acknowledged within their faith tradition. Pastor Rose Sparks did not plan to become a pastor. In fact, when she reflects upon the moments leading up to this journey, she describes a recognition that God was calling her to something more, identifying that feeling as a continual “tugging, an undeniable pull, that interrupted my plans and realigned my purpose.” Born and raised in Sullivan, Indiana, Pastor Rose grew up in the church surrounded by strong men and women of God, yet never really imagined herself behind the pulpit. In reality, this was unheard of; women did not hold leadership roles in the church. Yet today she holds the position of the lead pastor of Arlington United Methodist Church, in Bloomington, Indiana, an extension campus of a prominent local congregation, where she serves as both a leader of her church members and a trailblazer of change for women of the faith leading into the future.

Pastor Rose’s story is a powerful reflection of resilience, determination, faith, and purpose. Her journey is more than a personal triumph; it offers an exploration of identity, the endurance of theological conviction, and servant leadership as an outward action. Framed by Bamberg’s (2011) theory of identity construction, particularly the dilemmas of sameness versus difference, agency versus passivity, and constancy versus change, this interview-based narrative invites readers to walk along Pastor Rose’s journey of how her identity was shaped through seasons of confusion, heartache, rejection, resistance, and revelation, thus ultimately refined by the awakening and final submission to her divine calling.

According to Adventist Research (2025), only 8.4% of all pastors surveyed identified as female, highlighting the rarity of journeys like Pastor Rose’s. This underrepresentation is not isolated to a single denomination or geography; similar patterns exist across religious traditions worldwide, thus highlighting a broader global pattern. Across Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical Protestant, Islamic, and Buddhist traditions globally, women’s access to formal religious leadership roles continues to be shaped by theological interpretation, institutional hierarchy, and cultural norms (Lomotey, 2025).

Early Life and Foundation of Faith

Pastor Rose’s journey into her faith began as a young child. Her now religious leadership is deeply rooted in her early exposure to faith as an expectation as to who she was to become. These same expectations framed her identity around gender-related duties within the church. When asked about her formative years, she reflected with instant clarity and heartfelt conviction:

“I was raised in a legalistic, male-dominated home and church. While these two things created difficulties to overcome later in life, the freedom of worship in a Pentecostal church was a blessing.”

This paradox of identifiable strict religious structures on one hand and liberating worship on the other, allowed for both spiritual grounding and yet proposed an ongoing ideological conflict that could not be denied. Inside the home her mother was defined by cultural roles that followed the norm of those times that parallel the definition of servant-behavior that were expected of women, such as caring, nurturing, supportive, yet those traits were not identified as traits of leadership. She grew up recognizing that her mother had a spiritual influence within her life that modelled resilience that was constrained to the imminent role that she too was expected and defined to be in as she grew older. While the home represented a quiet expression of faith, the church offered a more formative, yet conflicted, spiritual pull for her. On one hand the freedom of worship within their Pentecostal tradition gave her a deep sense of connection and belonging to who she was, an open and safe space where she felt the Holy Spirit move and stir something within her even as a young girl. But on the other hand, the same church upheld firm distinctions about what male and female authority should look like beyond worship. This created an emotional conflict, as Pastor Rose began to feel not only to model her mother's servant heart in the home, but to also answer a deeper calling that extended her servant leadership desires beyond the boundaries traditionally set for women. The freedom to worship ignited a closer calling to her purpose, but the structural framework limited her to only dream of what her future might look like. The internal wrestling between obedience of her family, the calling of her God, tradition, and transformation, would become the hallmark of her servant leadership path.

When asked about the roles of adults in her family's church, Pastor Rose responded:

Men preached and were the leaders that sat on the board of the church. They made the decisions, they led the congregation, and they served as the voice of the body of the overall church. Women were allowed to sing, play instruments, instruct the kids, and other women, and cook for different events.

These roles were not just behavioral norms but structural mandates that reinforced deeply rooted beliefs about who was allowed to lead and who was expected to support. The pulpit was not a shared space; it was a gendered boundary line that was heavily guarded and rarely exposed to a woman's opinion.

This lived reality echoes the findings of Lee et al. (2025) whose research on Protestant congregations revealed that "church leadership has long been a male-dominated occupation, and women were traditionally prohibited from congregational leadership" (p. 1). Although women's representation in ministry has increased since the 1970s, women still remain significantly underrepresented in pastoral leadership. Furthermore, their research identified that clergywomen often encounter both a "glass ceiling" that restricts them to access influential pulpit positions, and a "glass cliff" that promotes women's failure in leadership is significantly greater than that of a man (Lee et al., 2025).

This scholarly evidence affirms Pastor Rose's observation that her early foundations of faith were rooted in not just a simple platform of proclamation but a structural symbol of exclusion, one that continues to separate gendered authority across multiple Christian denominations.

Calling and Decision to Pursue Ministry

As the interview questions shifted into reflecting upon when she first felt called to ministry, Pastor Rose remembers that stirring to be a part of something that ignited dating back to her childhood. One explicit memory she had as a little girl was that of a visiting missionary sharing their experience in Africa. After the service she found herself standing inside of the church restroom, staring at herself in the mirror, and whispering, “Am I going to Africa?” Though uncertain whether it was God’s prompting or simply the curiosity of her young girl’s heart longing to be a part of something greater than what was right in front of her, she now attributes meaning to that moment. It was not just a question; it was a premonition of life to come. *What can be said with certainty, as she shared, is that very moment*, “I grasped at the hope that my calling was part of something far greater than I could ever imagine.” That inner desire longing to serve beyond inside the walls of their tiny home, breaking the boundaries of expectations of her upbringing, marked the beginning of her servant leadership journey. While she did not yet have the ability to identify the stirring inside of her, her heart was being drawn to a deeper meaning of leadership that prioritized purpose over position and service over status.

Her continued reflection further described, “My first dream job as a kid was to be a preacher’s wife.” For Pastor Rose, which was the only authentic way she could imagine herself having a role that was close to the pulpit and one that served a congregation that would need her. At that time, Ministering and traveling the world was a distant place in her mind, and ministry felt like her future husband’s story not her own. She refused to ignore that inner desire to serve, as it was already deeply rooted within her, a desire shaped not by selfish ambition or the need for recognition, but by a willingness to give her life in support of those who needed spiritual growth, especially in areas that she could relate to.

This internal call just continued to intensify years later when her husband enrolled in a denominational program that was designed to help individuals find their call to ministry. After completing the program, he determined that clerical ministry was not his path, Pastor Rose remembers the heartbreak of facing the reality that her childhood dream of becoming a pastor’s wife was never going to happen. She describes the days and months after this realization to be filled with grief, sadness, and longing, not just because her childhood dream was now gone, but because she had to identify and discern why she was so heavily burdened by a decision that was solely his. This self-exploration allowed her to discern that maybe the calling was never meant to be his, and maybe the call might actually be her own. In a family and denomination that limited the authority and spiritual gifting of women to its purpose, she internally began to see a new path forming, one that did not require her to serve under a man, but rather to serve God directly and faithfully in her own right. This new awakening was both exciting and frightening, as she knew this declaration would not be met with acceptance from her parents, her elders, and those within her church family.

Pastor Rose continued to wrestle with doubt and purpose. Scripture passages about women being silent in the church repeated in her mind often, as did the cultural voice of her father and church elders that reminded the congregation that women were not supposed to lead from the pulpit. She carried out these conflicts with her throughout the next several years. She continued to serve in her expected roles as a church

organist, caretaker of the church, and volunteering in a diverse number of servant leadership positions. She remembered one night serving at a youth camp and she could feel the immense power of the Holy Spirit urging her to discern what she knew was instilled within her. She stated that she found herself stepping away from the camp and standing outside responding to what she recognized as an internal spiritual voice, she finally said, “Okay, I will do it, but you have to help me. I cannot do this by myself.” She went on to say that after she made that commitment to Him, everything in her felt as though “God smiled upon her,” identifying that moment as a sense of spiritual affirmation.

It was not just a personal decision, it was the ideal definition of servant leadership in its most vulnerable form, surrendering the need to understand and choose obedience to a higher calling, without fully knowing the foreseeable outcome. Yet despite that conversation and commitment to God, many years continued to go by. However, this calling was confirmed again in a quiet moment in her church basement while she was cleaning, where she fondly remembers this as another moment of spiritual confirmation.

She remembers this moment by stating:

It was not a booming voice, but a stillness that required my attention. I dropped to my knees and whispered yes. I also knew I could say no, and I also knew how to hesitate and consider, because this was a serious moment. At that time, I said yes, God I will go wherever you send me. I got up from my knees wondering how I would tell my non-traveling husband I was going to Africa.

In her own words, God did not send her to Africa, but instead He sent her to the pulpit, a place that in many ways felt just as scary as a faraway country. She stated, “it might have been easier to go to Africa. Not only did I have to face my parents, elders, and those who did not believe I should be doing this, but I also had the battle in my own heart over whether or not I truly was meant to lead as a pastor.” That internal battle between surrender and self-doubt, between obedience and family exclusion, is exactly where servant leaders are forged. Pastor Rose did not pursue ministry for the pure desire to be in charge. She responded to a call to serve beyond her home, to sacrifice selflessly, and to build up others in faith, understanding that her journey was yet unpaved.

Family and Community Response

Pastor Rose recalls that one of the hardest parts of her journey into ministry was preparing herself for the future conversation that she was going to have with her parents. Her journey into ministry, although confirmed divinely and supported by her husband, was not going to be welcomed and supported so openly by her parents. Their hesitation and resistance were not rooted in a lack of desire to see her succeed, but in the deeply held theological and cultural beliefs that shaped their religious and cultural views. They together believed a woman’s place in ministry was to serve within the home or in supportive positions inside the church, not at the pulpit within pastoral leadership. The known lack of support that she was about to face created an emotional and spiritual conflict that caused Pastor Rose to again doubt her calling to serve. Even today years later after accepting their position on her calling, she stated, “The call of

God doesn't always come with the applause of those you love, it comes with a responsibility to obey." While her parents did not necessarily agree with her choice, they did support her decision from afar.

It was during a season of faithful service, and not ambition, that the next door opened for her. While working as an organist for a local funeral home, she met a United Methodist Pastor who heard her play and invited her to join a small church to fill a gap in their music ministry. Despite the fact that this was not her home church, nor their denomination, she recognized that feeling of God prompting her to listen and obey once again. She recalls the moment as one of those opportunities, stating, "I knew that I knew that I knew I wasn't supposed to refuse." Her decision to say yes was not about seeking visibility to prove her calling to be true. It was about continued faithfulness, the very heart of servant leadership. Despite the disapproval of her parents, she responded to a clear need in the church, a position that mirrored Christ's model of humble obedience. Robert Greenleaf speaks to servant leadership, stating, "The servant-leader is a humble servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, often beyond their understanding why" (Greenleaf, 2008). This initial opportunity started with Pastor Rose's recognition that she was simply filling a void inside a church. However, as time moved on God continued to position her and her husband for a new chapter that would soon highlight her calling. Tensions between her new position at the Methodist church and her previous position at the Pentecostal church began to arise, and she and her husband made the difficult decision to leave, she stated, "God had already prepared the way for us."

Pastor Rose's husband, who had grown up in the Methodist tradition, found comfort in returning to his denomination. For Pastor Rose, however, this was an unfamiliar step into her future, one that was again not supported by her parents. Despite stepping into the unknown, what looked like a betrayal of her denominational faith on the outside was, in fact, a deep spiritual integration into a space where her calling as a servant leader would continue to emerge.

In this way, Pastor Rose's journey into the United Methodist Church began to represent more than a denominational choice, it began to reflect the journey that many servant leaders wrestle with between cultural expectations and divine intervention. Her willingness to serve in a new capacity before stepping into visibility modelled that very essence of Christ-like leadership mimicking a space within servant leadership.

Additionally, Pastor Rose's sense of calling emerged during her childhood, shaped by moments of deep reflection and quiet spiritual promptings. Her earliest encounters with ministry aspirations began with a missionary's story that woke something within her, something she now connects with the early voice of God's calling on her life. Though her home life and surroundings distinctly defined women's roles as supportive and behind the scenes, her longing to serve beyond those set limitations never ceased to leave her. This early conflict between obedience and acceptance inspired the kind of self-awareness and moral grounding that form the basis of Authentic Leadership Theory (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Her humility and willingness to serve despite lacking familial support, further exemplify servant leadership as defined by Greenleaf (2008), where true leadership begins with the desire to serve others first. As her journey continued to unfold, Pastor Rose increasingly engaged in leadership rooted in connection, shared growth, and spiritual alignment all pillars of Relational Leadership

Theory, which highlights leadership as collaborative and a values-driven process (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The continued responses that Pastor Rose received from her family and community were mixed by a complex interplay of support, excitement, scepticism, silence, and judgment. When asked about where the hardest reactions came from, she shared:

My immediate family was just fine with it. My parents and extended family, I believe, also knew some ministry was coming; in whatever form, none of us knew. My dad struggled with it, but we only had one conversation. I presume he made peace with it. There was also much support from my siblings and closest friends. There were additional extended family that openly questioned why I thought I could be a pastor. Others in this group were incredibly supportive and helpful.

These mixed emotions and somewhat limited support she received from her parents and extended family reflected a common reality for many women who find themselves stepping into nontraditional leadership roles, especially when deeply rooted religious and cultural expectations are at the forefront of their direction (Pargament et al., 2000).

Pastor Rose's identification of feeling alone during these pivotal times continues to highlight what research identifies as social exclusion stress, where the absence of familial affirmation can further increase internal doubt, especially for leaders whose callings defy traditional expectations. This emotional experience also aligns with authentic leadership theory, which asserts that leaders develop through moments of personal struggle that require a strong sense of self-awareness and internal moral compass that is often identified as a strong core ideology of one's being (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Rather than being inspired by acknowledgement and approval, Pastor Rose was motivated by a quiet conviction that only she could lean into. She noted that the absence of affirmations created moments that allowed fear and doubt that "could bury me in guilt", specifically when external voices continue to further highlight the cultural messages, she grew up with, messages just as telling her that women were not meant to lead, and that women have a place of silence in the church. As she shared, "Spiritually, it can affect me in this area if I let the opinions of others keep me from doing what God has called me to do. It can bury me in guilt and fear, and at brief moments, it has. Not so much anymore." Her recognition of these emotional phases echo findings in authentic leadership research, which highlights that leaders are shaped by adversity through self-awareness, moral clarity, and internalized values (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Community reactions continued to complicate her journey. She recalled that "there have been people in nursing homes or hospitals or other places where I go to minister who have been surprised, some not pleased and then some who were thrilled that a woman could be a pastor". These responses continued to range from disapproval to excitement that demonstrated gendered expectations embedded with congregational life. Allured (2022) argues that such reactions reflect both the persistence of cultural norms and the slow transformation occurring as more women begin to make the choice to step into leadership roles that are more visible than before. Furthering highlighting the historical role of Methodist women in advancing leadership and gender justice within the church, illustrating both continuous cultural barriers and the slow transformation of women's roles within religious organizations.

Even within her extended family, resistance was not often subtle. She explained that “the cousins who challenged me directly along with the pastors and others who have strong opinions about women ministers have often scared me, or upset me, most of which were not to my face.” These biased opinions and stereotypes of women in religious leadership roles correspond with research on women clergy who often report indirect criticism, social avoidance, or quiet disapproval as barriers to leadership. (Lomotey, 2025).

Yet despite the external pressures, her sense of calling continued to remain firm. Perhaps the most powerful example of this resilience is her recollection of discerning whether to accept her current pastoral appointment. She recalled:

Just before accepting the appointment to the church in Bloomington where I currently serve, I was at home on a Saturday and felt the need to drive to the other church where I was serving. God and I had a chat. I had to have confirmation before accepting the new appointment. God gave it to me that day. I know He has been patient with my long-time-keep-asking perspective on what I believe God has called me to do.

This moment further demonstrates authentic leadership in its purest form, leading from conviction, guided by values and anchored in spiritual identity rather than external validation.

Pastor Rose also demonstrates a deep sense of humility when she reflected upon her journey compared to others: “I realize that being in a female-accepting denomination, I have not faced the struggles that many women have faced. I love reading about the women who followed their calling when there was not an open denomination for them.” Her awareness aligns with servant leadership’s focus on stewardship and empathy, recognizing the broader struggles of women whose denominational framework offer far fewer pathways.

Despite the resistance she encountered, one voice remained consistently supportive, which was that of her husband.

My husband has been a big supporter. He believes in my calling and my practice as a pastor.” His support reflects the relational dimension of leadership highlighted in Relational Leadership Theory, which suggests that leaders can thrive when trusted relationships reinforce their purpose, resilience, and growth (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Taken together, the family and community responses to Pastor Rose’s calling highlight not only the emotional burden she carried, but also the strength of her developing core ideology. These layers of affirmation, resistance, silence, and eventual acceptance reinforce the developmental journey that research scholars identify as core transparency to authentic and servant leadership: leaders are shaped through meaningful struggle, guided by purpose, and sustained by relationships that further support their calling.

Overcoming Challenges and Embracing Leadership

Pastor Rose's journey into ministry has not been without struggle, identifying one of her most persistent challenges being the silent judgment of other pastors and community members, both past and present. She recalled that one of her biggest obstacles was overcoming the comments and looks of others when she walked into a room. She stated that "the opinions of other pastors and what people have continuously written about the questioning of female pastors remains unfair at times. Additionally, she states that not feeling comfortable in a men's-only clergy groups was a barrier that she has had to break over time." These experiences reinforced the tension she felt as a woman in a traditionally male-dominated leadership role and reflect what Eagly and Carli (2007) refer to as the "labyrinth of leadership" for women, as often feeling invisible on a path often filled with resistance, contradiction, and misrecognition.

Initially, Pastor Rose found herself feeling out of place and uneasy in predominately male clergy circles, noting that she did not feel comfortable in a men's only clergy group and that there was no such thing as a women's only clergy group. Her discomfort relates to the findings of the relational exclusion that frequently undermines women in leadership (Ibarra et al., 2013). However, she developed spiritual and emotional strategies that helped her to remain resilient during these recurring periods of constantly being questioned. In one powerful moment of discernment, she recalls praying:

I prayed. I begged God to tell me if I was doing something I should not be doing. I told Him if I was not listening to get me fired. I assured Him I would quit this very moment if He wanted me to. He has never answered those questions.

These prayers were not expressions of doubt in her ability to lead, but deep reflections of true authentic leadership, which is grounded in moral clarity and spiritual awareness (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Pastor Rose's inner dialogue and internal conflict reveal the truth of authentic leadership: a commitment to aligning values and actions while remaining committed to one's personal integrity and core ideology.

As her leadership continued to grow, it was transformed in quiet resistance to the continued expectations placed upon her. She humbly shared:

In that meeting with God before this appointment, I finally said to God, "I would rather stand before You and hear You say I wasn't supposed to be a pastor, then to stand before You and have You say to me, why did I let men stop me from doing what I knew you called me to do.

This statement reflects what Ospina and Foldy (2009) discussion of the relationship between leadership, power, context, and agency, specifically how social identifies and structures can both shape and constrain the ways leadership is enacted. This is a type of leadership that arises not from hierarchical power but from conviction, calling, and moral courage. Despite moments of guilt, fear, confusion, and conviction, Pastor Rose highlighted that she has "become less sensitive to the opinions of others" over time, reflecting a testament to spiritual maturity and development of what Greenleaf (2008) termed servant-first leadership in practice.

Although Pastor Rose humbly refrains from claiming leadership success, stating, “I do not consider myself an exceptionally good leader. At times I wonder if I am leading at all. I am often like a church manager than a leader,” *yet* her practices show otherwise. She cultivates trust by ministering at hospitals, nursing homes, and homes of the scared, alone, and dying. She connects with children of all ages by attending their games and performances and shows support and love through communication of texts, emails, visits, and surprise gifts. These acts further highlight principles of authentic leadership (Walumbwa et al., 2008), including relational transparency, ethical behavior, and meaningful engagement with others. When asked about her accomplishments, her answers were also humble and simple. *She stated*, “My accomplishments come from loving and caring for the people, that is what I do that is what I am called to do.” This response continues to align with the servant leadership perspective that true impact is measured not in authority or control but in the flourishing of those served (Laub, 1999). Though she has not faced the extreme hostility some female clergy have had to endure, Pastor Rose remains aware of the persistent theological barriers that some women encounter. She reflected; there are many who are in the 1 Timothy 2:12 camp of ‘no speaking, no authority for women belief.’ Nevertheless, she believes her call has remained firm over time. “God has not left half of the population out because they are female”, *she* declared. Supported by her husband and shaped by a lifetime of prayerful discernment, Pastor Rose closes this season of ministry not with a need to prove herself but with a peaceful resolve. She stated, “In the remaining years that I have as a female pastor, a female leader, I want to do that, just be myself and not try to prove anything, just love people as they are just as Christ loved and accepted me as I am.”

Methodology

This research article utilizes a qualitative narrative interview approach that was based upon reflective data to explore leadership identity and core ideology development within a faith-based organizational context. The narrative is fully grounded in the lived experiences and exploration of the journey of Pastor Rose Sparks, further allowing for an in-depth exploration of how leadership identity is developed through personal reflection, calling, and organizational culture and interaction. All interview responses were reviewed and explored to determine patterns and themes identified within the recurring experiences, ideas, and narratives related to leadership identity, calling, resilience, relational engaged, and the expectations of gender-related roles through a faith-based lens. These recurring patterns were then organized into identified themes and connected to the leadership theories that guided the analysis throughout the exploration.

Specifically, the analysis is informed by Servant Leadership, Authentic Leadership, and Relational Leadership theories, which allowed for a conceptual framework for developing a better understanding of leadership behaviours, decision-making processes, and practice through a faith-based lens. This approach allowed the study to capture the complexity of leadership as a female and spiritually influenced journey within a faith-based organization, shaped by cultural expectations, lived experiences, and leadership practices, while also reflecting upon broader global leadership dynamics within religious contexts.

Results

This research article and narrative analysis reveal that leadership within a faith-based organizational culture emerges through a core ideology that is deeply personal and spiritually guided through a journey that is shaped by cultural expectations and lived experiences that cannot simply be reduced to a one-size-fits all model. Pastor Rose Sparks' story further highlights how leadership identity develops through moments of self-reflection, recognition of one's calling, resistance, and relational engagement, reflecting both individual conviction and broader organizational expectations and influences. Her detailed narration of her experiences demonstrates that leadership is not defined solely by positional authority, but instead by consistent practices of service, resilience, and connection with others. These identified thematic patterns further highlight how female leadership within religious contexts continues to evolve, navigating both structural barriers while also creating new opportunities for influence within both local and global leadership environments.

Discussion

This article explores the narrative responses that address the central question of how leadership identity and core ideology develop together within a faith-based organizational context through a female lens. Through this exploration the responses given by Pastor Rose Sparks further demonstrate that leadership emerges through a combination of spiritual calling, lived experiences, and relational engagement. Her journey reflects key principles and highlights practical applications of servant, authentic, and relational leadership, while also highlighting how leadership is formed and shaped within organizational structures influenced by cultural and theological expectations. From a global leadership perspective, her experiences and her journey further demonstrate how women in leadership roles continue to navigate barriers that are not isolated to once specific context but can be reflected across diverse religious and cultural environments that are globally related.

While this article provides meaningful insight into leadership identity development, is limited to a single narrative case, which may not fully represent the broader experiences of all women in faith-based leadership roles or positions. However, the exploration of this narrative journey offers a valuable understanding of how leadership is developed, experienced, practiced, and sustained within organizational and global contexts. This research helps to contribute to the field of global leadership by expanding the conversation beyond traditional organizational settings and cultures, highlighting leadership development as an ongoing values-driven, relational, and culturally influenced process shaped by one's core ideology. Future research would allow for expansion upon this narrative by continue to explore the leadership lived experiences of women across additional faith-based organizations, denominations, and cultural context within a broaden global landscape.

Conclusion: Embodied Faith and the Future of Women in Religious Leadership

While Pastor Rose's individual journey is rooted in a specific American denominational context, the leadership barriers she faces are globally recognized. Women across

diverse religious leadership contexts in Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and beyond encounter relatable conflicts between personally identified callings and institutional restrictions, purpose, and cultural expectations. The leadership competencies reflected in her journey, such as servant leadership's commitment to others, authentic leadership's grounding in internal values, and relational leadership's emphasis on trust, may have relevance beyond a single cultural context. These competencies may offer valuable insight for leaders navigating in complex and difficult environments. In this context, Pastor Rose's story extends far beyond a personal narrative and offers an example of leadership emerging from a driving conviction rather than position.

Pastor Rose's narrative is more than a singular journey; it provides an example of leadership theory reflected in application and practice. Her noted experiences resonate deeply with Authentic Leadership Theory (Walumbwa et al., 2008), which highlights self-awareness, relational transparency, and a self-discovered, internalized core ideology. Her consistency in returning to prayer, walking in discernment, pursuing self-growth, and unwavering submission to God's call, despite the resistance and uncertainty for those around her, demonstrates a rare spiritual integrity, moral clarity, and internal discipline to her true core ideology. Her leadership reflects not only selfless behaviour, but an internalized moral compass that she describes as spiritual discernment, aligning closely with authentic leadership's emphasis on values-based self-regulation (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Equally, her leadership reflects that of the pure essence of Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), where leadership begins not from a pure desire for power, but from a deep-seated desire to serve others from within. Her role as a pastor has been marked by acts of presence, selfless giving, and meaningful actions, such as conversations held at the bedside, handshakes after church, and hugs to the hurting; all practices that build trust and restore faith in humanity. These micro-acts of leadership, often invisible to institutional power structures, are exactly where the theology of care and Relational Leadership Theory can intertwine (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

For future generations of female religious leaders, Pastor Rose's story serves as both a challenge and a hope. The challenge is to remain rooted and confident in one's defined purpose even when institutions lag affirmation. The hope is that as more female and male leaders embody these values, the path becomes wider, the questions become softer, and the resistance less fierce.

In Pastor Rose's own words: "I would rather stand before You and hear You say I was not supposed to be a pastor, than to stand before You and have You say to me, why did I let men stop me from doing what I knew You called me to do". May her faithful obedience inspire a whole new generation of both men and women to walk boldly into their calling that has been placed upon their lives, with humility, authenticity, and transparency. Even more so, may the unwavering courage to simply be themselves inspire greater empowerment that extends far beyond individual denominations and contributes to the ever-evolving global landscape of religious leadership.

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