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**An Examination of Authentic Leadership in a Religious Organization**

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# **An Examination of Authentic Leadership in a Religious Organization**

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# **An Examination of Authentic Leadership in a Religious Organization**

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which authentic leadership is evidenced in a religious organizational setting. Applications of authentic leadership theory have been tested in diverse settings, but few such applications have occurred in religious organizations. Thus, the goal was to explore how the core components of authentic leadership exist and operate inside religious organizations. A qualitative approach was used to examine evidence of authentic leadership as exhibited by 13 group leaders in a university-level religious organization. Interviews were conducted in order to determine the extent to which the four components of authentic leadership were exhibited by each group leader. Survey data were then collected from 36 group members to corroborate the leaders' accounts.

Analysis of the group leader interviews identified widespread evidence for the core components of authentic leadership, self-awareness, balanced processing of information, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective, additionally illuminating nuances in leadership specific to this religious organization. Survey results

from group members corroborated the accounts of authentic leadership presented by their group leaders. In conclusion, the thesis demonstrates a positive beginning to the introduction of authentic leadership to religious organizations and serves to provide a useful qualitative glimpse into the unexplored utility of the construct of authentic leadership for religious organizations.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2 – Literature Review .....	5
Chapter 3 – Methodology .....	16
Chapter 4 – Findings .....	23
Chapter 5 – Discussion .....	44
Figures.....	49
Appendix.....	52
References.....	56

## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

Leadership is an integral component in groups across multiple dimensions. From sports to the boardroom, having an effective leader can be the difference between achieving success and failure. Numerous studies have examined the commonalities between “effective” leaders, resulting in a myriad of suggestions and theories as to what the “best” kind of leadership may be for different teams. The management and organizational behavior literature in particular has provided various theories on leadership, including spiritual leadership, ethical leadership, and authentic leadership. The potential of any type of leadership to improve group cohesiveness, employee satisfaction, or organizational citizenship behavior often proves an invaluable asset to an organization. While much of the research investigating leadership is situated within the corporate world, the sphere of influence in which leadership operates is clearly not restricted to this domain. Thus, further exploration of these theories within a different context provides an interesting test of their generalizability and fluidity within multiple bodies of literature.

One of my personal areas of interest lies in the context of religious groups. Depending on the religion or specific denomination with a certain religion, the hierarchy and structure of leadership can vary greatly. Although theological differences clearly exist across the vast number of religious and spiritual groups, one uniting factor amongst the majority of these worldviews is the necessity of meeting as some form of a group. Whether or not a religion/spirituality has a codified text or set of beliefs, it is the

convening of members to discuss these beliefs that is a necessary aspect of each community. A key aspect for this congregation of members is the leadership involved in directing, teaching, or organizing the various events, discussions, and thoughts important to their belief system.

As a lifelong follower of Christianity and a recent alumnus of a university campus ministry, the experience of leadership in this setting is very familiar and salient. I have experienced several forms of leadership within this religious setting, both as a member and a leader. Much like any other human, I have been a part of both “good” and “bad” groups, with varying levels of “good” and “bad” leaders. Many positive experiences with leaders were the impetus for significant personal growth, yet other negative experiences with leaders surely stunted my development. Although I am certainly responsible for some degree of my own successes and failures in these groups, the role and influence of leadership in my personal trajectory were significant. The variability of these experiences spurred me to investigate effective leadership, using as a starting point the management and organizational behavior literature. Once exposed to this domain of research, I found one theory of leadership in particular to resonate with my personal experiences and interests: authentic leadership.

Despite its relatively smaller investigation in the literature, authentic leadership captured my attention and imagination. On the surface, many aspects of this theory rang true with my experiences in religious group settings. Specifically, the four main components of authentic leadership, self-awareness, balanced processing of information, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective (Walumbwa et al., 2008),

greatly appealed to the breadth and depth of my experiences. Curious to establish a better picture of this theory outside of the corporate context, I attempted to review the presence of authentic leadership across multiple disciplines. However, I found limited applications of this theory to have been made outside its original field.

Given the absence of research on authentic leadership in a religious organization, I embarked on a study to determine if this mode of leadership was existent in an alternative setting, that of religious groups. Thus, no assumptions about the generalizability of authentic leadership in this new domain were made. To acquire evidence for the applicability of authentic leadership in this alternate setting, a qualitative methods approach was necessary. Given the novelty of the setting, a qualitative approach seemed most appropriate as it would allow me to gather a more natural, comprehensive indication of how authentic leadership might or might not fit within this new realm. However, the lack of time and resources afforded by a master's level researcher made the completion of a more comprehensive look into this novel setting infeasible. Thus, some meaningful quantitative data were also collected as a substitute for the additional qualitative data that I could not gather.

Thus, investigation was meant to serve as a continuing step in the development of authentic leadership as an interdisciplinary theory. Although this study is limited in its scope, it is a necessary test to further the generalizability of this framework. By establishing authentic leadership's connections to a field outside its original conception, further opportunities into additional domains may find interest and support. Ultimately,

this study aims to begin a conversation about the interdisciplinary application of the construct of authentic leadership to a religious group setting.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature Review**

There are two sections in this chapter. The first section will explore the literature regarding three specific theories of leadership, including the motivations behind the final selection of one specific theory of leadership. The second section will investigate the literature surrounding leadership in religious organizations.

### **Leadership**

Leadership exists in some form or fashion in just about every cooperative aspect of life. Any group of two or more people working together typically necessitates some form of leadership. Yet, what qualities make up effective leadership? Pop culture teaches us to value leaders who are confident and ambitious. Sports culture values leaders who are competitive and focused, who fight through the pain. Although what constitutes effective leadership surely has important differences between domains, it is likely that there are components of effective leadership that are universally evident across fields. This section will explore three prominent theories of leadership particularly relevant to religious organizations, including spiritual, ethical, and authentic leadership.

One theory of leadership explored in the business management field is that of spiritual leadership. Fry (2003) defined spiritual leadership as “comprising the values, attitudes, and behaviors that are necessary to intrinsically motivate one’s self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership (p. 694).” Fry additionally conveys that spiritual leadership entails both creating an organizational vision in which life has meaning, and also instituting a culture steeped in altruistic love in which leaders and members are concerned and appreciate one another. Thus, spiritual

leadership emphasizes key aspects of spirituality and religiosity that are important to many leaders' and members' pursuit of meaning and membership.

Although the strength of spiritual leadership lies in its focus on the spiritual, transcendent aspects of humanity and ultimately leadership, applying this theory in a religious organizational setting seemed less likely to offer a novel angle on leadership due to the overlap of spirituality. By this, I mean that much of the motivations behind Fry's work involved bringing spiritual leadership into the workplace, not vice versa (Fry, 2008). Additionally, the roots of spiritual leadership come from spiritual and religious traditions that focus on altruism, love, and hope (Sweeney & Fry, 2012). Although spiritual leadership theory and the outcomes associated with it are surely applicable to a better understanding of religious organizations, research has primarily targeted leaders in non-religious organizations for training and development informed by core tenants of this theory (Fry, 2008).

Given the restrictions of studying spiritual leadership in a religious organization, another prominent theory of leadership that seemed viable was ethical leadership. This theory, put forth by Brown et al. (2005), argues that integrity, ethical standards, and fair treatment of employees are the foundations of ethical leadership. However, simply possessing these features is not enough to constitute ethical leadership (Treviño et al., 2000). The full picture of ethical leadership encompasses a leader who not only promotes these values by regularly enacting them, but also a leader who actively holds others in the organization accountable for those ethical standards as well (Treviño & Brown, 2004). Practically, these managers regularly go out of their way to discuss ethics explicitly with

employees and encourage them to “be just and seek justice” (Brown et al., 2005). Thus, ethical leadership theory more than adequately addresses aspects of leadership that are vulnerable to unethical behavior.

Although ethical leadership theory would seem to rightfully aim to address the current call for improved ethical standards of leaders in the current day, its specificity seems too focused on one domain of leadership. This narrow focus appears to neglect other aspects of leadership that do not directly involve ethics, morality, or justice. Whereas ethical leadership is positively associated with extra employee effort, satisfaction with leaders, and reporting problems (Toor & Ofori, 2009), additional dimensions of leadership likewise hold promising positive outcomes.

Although spiritual and ethical leadership each provide a valuable framework from which to view leadership, the theory of authentic leadership seemed better suited for a study of a religious organizational setting. The construct of authenticity is hardly a new concept, as ancient Greeks described it as being “true to oneself” (Harter, 2002). A recent resurgence regarding authenticity in the management literature has questioned whether being true to oneself is the upper limit of authentic leadership (Shamir & Eliahu, 2005). The revival of the idea of authentic leadership can be tied to the increasing call for positive forms of leadership that stem from the lack of accountability and ethical behavior exhibited by many organizational leaders (Avolio & Luthans, 2006; Dealy & Thomas, 2006). The fallout from these scandals has increased the accountability required in many boardrooms, as well as demanded greater alignment between the words and actions of executives (Aguilera, 2005; Simons, 2002). In addition to these macro-level

effects of authentic leadership, revamped interest in authenticity has also been motivated by the effects it might have on leaders on an individual level. Specifically, various divisions of psychology have uncovered support for the positive association that authenticity has with a number of positive psychological constructs, including psychological well-being, self-esteem, and enhanced performance (Grandey, Fiske, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005; Kernis, 2003).

In concert with these findings and other emerging research regarding authentic leadership, Walumba et al. (2008) developed and validated a unified theory-based measurement of authentic leadership. In this now popularized measure, *authentic leadership* is defined as “a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development” (Walumba et al., 2008, p. 94). Within this definition, the authors explicitly addressed some assumptions underlying authentic leadership. Most notably, despite arguing that positive psychological capacities and positive ethical climate both promote the development of authentic leadership, and vice versa, they are not the core components of authentic leadership. Instead, the core components of authentic leadership, according to Walumba et al., are self-awareness, balanced processing of information, relational transparency, and an internalized moral perspective.

The authors’ version of *self-awareness* is a multilayered feature. First, it signifies “an understanding of one’s strengths and weaknesses and the multi-faceted nature of the

self, which includes gaining insight into the self through exposure to others, and being cognizant of one's impact on other people" (Walumba et al., 2008, p. 95; also see Kernis, 2003). For example, a leader may or may not hold an accurate understanding of how his/her own individual capabilities (or lack thereof) may assist in the team's collaborative effort to complete a project. Further, these "self-aware" leaders regularly seek feedback about themselves from others in order to update their conceptualization of their multi-faceted self. One example might be carrying out regular formal or informal inquiries with their team or co-workers regarding their leadership that would improve future interactions or policies. Moreover, self-awareness also extends to a leader's understanding of how he/she impacts other people. For instance, a self-aware leader might understand how one's status or power within an organization might intimidate or create anxiety for a subordinate voicing a recommendation, and subsequently alter his/her own behavior in an attempt to alleviate some of this pressure. Finally, Walumba et al. (2008) also described self-awareness as "an understanding of how one derives and makes meaning of the world and how that meaning making process impacts the way one views himself or herself over time (p. 95)." While this final aspect is broad and certainly very context-dependent, one example might entail a leader who understands how his/her own personal philosophy or worldview (e.g. Buddhism) informs the lens in which work/life events are processed and decisions are made over time.

The second core component of authentic leadership, according to Walumba et al. (2008), is balanced processing of information. This component is described in two ways, with the first referring to leaders who "show that they objectively analyze all relevant

data before coming to a decision.” In this case, a leader high in balanced processing of information would exhaust all avenues of empirical data before reaching a conclusion, rather than making a decision based on a “gut feeling” or subjective reason (i.e. personal preference). Does a leader carefully listen to all points of view, or does he/she rely on a single voice or motive to come to a decision? In addition, leaders who have a high balanced processing of information solicit views that challenge their deeply held positions (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, et al., 2005). One relevant example comes from religion, where a leader might or might not invite questions or doubts about his/her own deeply held theological beliefs.

The third core component of authentic leadership is relational transparency. This feature embodies “presenting one’s authentic self (as opposed to a fake or distorted self) to others” (Walumba et al., 2008, p. 95). True to its aforementioned Greek roots, this component is fairly self-explanatory. Either one is open and forthright about thoughts, feelings, and experiences, or one can hide his/her true selves behind the proverbial mask so that no one else can truly gauge an authentic self. Research has shown that this openness to share true, personal thoughts and behaviors ultimately works to promote trust (Kernis, 2003). Thus, relationally transparent leaders always vocalize what they truly mean, and are willing to admit when they have made mistakes.

The fourth and final core component of authentic leadership is internalized moral perspective. In this case it refers to “an internalized and integrated form of self-regulation...guided by internal moral standards and values versus group, organizational and societal pressures...[resulting] in decision-making and behavior that is consistent

with these internalized values” (Walumba et al., 2008, p. 95; also see Ryan & Deci, 2003; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, et al., 2005). Leaders who exhibit a highly internalized moral perspective display beliefs that are consistent with their actions. For instance, a leader who values confidentiality does not share any sensitive personal information from a conversation with a subordinate without explicit permission. Further, external pressures and messages that could influence a leader’s actions and behaviors may be easy to fend off if they do not align with the leader’s core beliefs.

Thus, of the three theories of leadership explored, the theory of authentic leadership seemed to be the most appropriate selection to investigate in a religious organizational setting.

### **Leadership in Religious Organizations**

One specific setting in which effective leadership is important is in religious organizations. Although religious leaders are by no means impervious to poor, unethical leadership (Goodman, 2014), they have also demonstrated positive, effective leadership both inside and outside of their organizations (Manglos, 2011). Typically, the popular conception of religious leaders includes those who sit at the top of organizational hierarchies or who regularly speak on behalf of the institution to their members. For instance, many world religions have some form of weekly meeting as a large congregation in which a leader facilitates some type of rituals, teachings, or worship. In Christianity, this might be a priest leading mass in a Catholic church, or a pastor giving a sermon in a Protestant church. Further, many followers of Islam are led as a large body by their imam, while Judaism sees its congregations as led by the rabbi. Some followers

of particular branches of Hinduism and Buddhism also meet as larger groups at their temples to worship and perform rituals led by their pujari and monks, respectively. Although these larger gatherings of religious followers are how popular culture views typical religious leader-member interactions, another form of leadership in religious organizations has slowly become more prominent over the few past decades (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011)

Although large meetings as a congregation are popular, many religious systems supplement these gatherings with smaller group meetings. In these smaller settings, there is a more intimate, manageable community surrounding a leader. For example, a small group in a Christian context might be a Sunday school class, a Bible study group, or prayer/book/discussion group, etc. These reduced numbers allow group leaders and members to communicate and interact on a more personal level, ultimately providing a different level of personal, intellectual, and emotional access to leaders that members might not have otherwise had in a traditional large congregation setting.

Although the typical setting for many congregations and small groups to meet is within the main church, mosque, synagogue, or temple, another expansive setting in which these small groups take place across religious systems is at the university level. Numerous university campus religious organizations are represented across the nation. The Hindu Student Council and Muslim Students' Association have over 50 and 100 chapters across the U.S., respectively ("About HSC," n.d.; Dowd-Gailey, 2004). In addition, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) has over 100 campuses nationwide ("Find My Campus," n.d.), and the Jewish campus ministry Hillel

is active in over 550 campuses across the United States (“About Hillel,” n.d.). These large followings amount to just a sliver of the total number of religious organizations in the nation, demonstrating their ripe grounds from which to analyze leadership.

Given the sheer volume of campus ministries under their umbrella organizations, the parallels between religious organizations and non-religious organizations start to become more evident. Reviewing a few vision statements and missions from popular non-religious organizations highlighted some of these similarities. Microsoft’s mission, for example, is to “empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more” (“About Microsoft,” n.d.). IKEA’s vision, “to create a better every day life for the many people” (“This Is IKEA,” n.d.). *Empowerment, achievement, a better every day life*, these are terms that echo the vision of many religious organizations. While certainly influenced by the competitive branding climate of today’s organizations, these visions and missions share similar qualities with religious organizations. Hillel’s mission entails, “enriching the lives of Jewish students so that they may enrich the Jewish people and the world” (“About Hillel,” n.d.). Or consider the Hindu Student Council’s vision “to inspire the development of an integrated personality based upon the spiritual and cultural treasures of Hindu heritage. An integrated Hindu personality is the amalgamation of the highest Hindu values and the best western cultural values, and enables the youth to be spiritual, ethical, caring and socially adept citizens” (“About HSC,” n.d.). Although differences between non-religious and religious organizations exist, core aspects of their visions reference empowering their followers/customers with a product/service/belief system that works for the betterment of the individual as well as the society.

In light of these similarities in the vision and mission of non-religious and religious organizations, it seemed appropriate to return to the construct of leadership. Although it is more difficult to find parallels between the larger congregational meetings in typical religious organizations and every-day workplace meetings, the small groups offered by university religious organizations encompass more of the close-knit leader-member interactions prevalent in the daily operations in non-religious organizations. In other words, the scale of group members that a group leader from a religious organization might oversee is better represented by the size of team led by a manager/supervisor from a non-religious organization. This is the reason that, in order to investigate the small group leaders at university-level religious organization, I chose to draw from the research and theories surrounding leadership from management literature.

Although authentic leadership theory has been investigated and applied to numerous settings, including occupational therapy, politics, and business, (Dillon, 2001; Bissessar, 2010; Endrissat et al., 2007), little to no applications have come in the realm of university religious organizations. For multiple reasons, a qualitative approach was the necessary methodological approach. First, assessing these qualities of authentic leadership in a new setting required an approach that allowed for more natural, rich descriptions and context that could inform the field about the role and presence of authentic leadership in a more nuanced fashion. Understanding this community's distinct connections to authentic leadership would lay the groundwork for future inquiries regarding authentic leadership in this sector. Second, both reviews of authentic leadership literature and calls from the original developers of the authentic leadership measure have

identified the need for further diversified methodological approaches to expand the generalizability of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2011; Walumba et al., 2008).

Therefore, I used qualitative methodology in thesis to examine the following research question:

*How are the core components of authentic leadership evidenced in a religious organizational setting?*

### **Chapter 3 – Methodology**

In order to examine the evidence for the features of authentic leadership in this new setting, a qualitative research methodology was necessary. Aspects of a grounded theory methodology, specifically constant comparison, were used, as this thesis neither sought to test an existing theory or generate a new theory. Rather, given the novelty of the setting, for an application of leadership theory, I envisioned an investigation of how the qualities of authentic leadership might exist and operate within this new arena and contribute to the future applications of this framework as it extends to sources outside its original literature.

#### **Setting**

All data were collected from a religious organization affiliated with a large public university in the southwestern region of the United States. Located near campus, the organization was easily accessible to students. The physical layout of the religious organization allowed for both open and intimate group meetings. Outside of the four full-time employees and two interns, the organization's programs and events were primarily run by the student body group known as the Leadership Council. Each year, two of the full-time employees, the director and assistant director, conducted interviews with students applying to join the Leadership Council. Applicants were placed into one of four sub-councils that comprise the Leadership Council: Outreach, Small Group, Connect, and Programming. Each section's members carried out the various roles necessary to plan and execute the goals, events, and meetings established by the directors of the organization. Both the entire Leadership Council and each sub-council met once every week,

discussing, planning, and praying about various topics and happenings in their respective groups, as well as completing activities promoting further leadership development.

### **Participants**

Of the different sub-council groups, the Small Group Council was the most intriguing and relevant for my study. Members on the Small Group Council were known as “small group leaders,” as each led his/her own unique “small group” meeting every week. Unlike other sub-councils and their respective sub-groups, small group meetings revolved around content and practices that focused more on personal and spiritual growth and goals. Thus, the more intimate and personally challenging nature of small groups provided a more interesting setting to explore the features of authentic leadership.

### ***Leaders***

Group leaders were responsible for facilitating varying degrees of discussion, prayer, projects, or religious text interpretation for one 90-120-minute session each week. Group leaders personally developed their own semester-long and week-to-week meeting agendas and goals, with the freedom to focus on whichever topics they wanted. Each small group was led by one to three group leaders, with the youngest leaders sophomores in college and eldest recent alumni. Of the 18 total small group leaders in the organization, 13 leaders agreed to participate, with all nine of the small groups in the organization represented. Gender was evenly distributed, with seven female and six male group leaders. Additionally, ten leaders identified as “White” and three as “Latino.”

### ***Members***

Each of the small groups consisted of two to eleven group members, ranging from freshman to fifth-year seniors. Of the 49 total small group members, 36 members agreed to participate, with eight of the nine small groups represented. The overall gender distribution among group members was 2:1, with more women (24) than men (12). All but two groups had a homogenous group gender makeup, with the Gamma and Zeta groups being the heterogeneous groups. Each group had been meeting regularly for a minimum of three months (.25 years), all the way up to three years.

### **Recruitment Procedure**

The director of the organization was contacted and given information about the study, including the procedure, my contact information, and potential risks associated with participating. This information was passed along from the director to the small group leaders, who then discussed the possibility of participation with their group members. Once full agreement was reached within the group, each small group leader individually contacted me researcher and established a time to meet.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted at the organization with group leaders outside of their normal meeting times. No other group member or co-leader was present for each interview. Leaders were assured that participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential. Group leaders then signed the consent form (Appendix C). Each interview ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed for data analysis. Upon completion of each interview, group leaders were given a Qualtrics survey link to distribute to their group

members on their own. The survey link remained open for all group members for two weeks after the final interview took place. After the conclusion of this two-week period, I contacted the director of the organization regarding a voluntary focus group that group leaders could attend with the researcher in an attempt to improve trustworthiness. 6 group leaders attended the focus group session, and also agreed to email me copies of some of their group materials. Following the focus group meeting, the director allowed me to make copies of various small group leadership training materials that detailed methods and strategies used by the directors when instructing the small group leaders.

## **Data Sources**

### ***Interviews***

Data were collected from group leaders through individual semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and artifacts. Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A for interview protocol) with group leaders aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the evidence and manifestations of the components of authentic leadership in this novel setting. To achieve this, interviews consisted of questions related to demographics, individual/group goals, leadership experience, trust, vulnerability, comfort, and the four features of authentic leadership laid out by Walumba et al. (2008).

Figure 1.

Small Group Name	Number of Leaders	Age of Leaders	Gender of Leaders	Group Lifespan (years)
Alpha	2	Senior/Alumni	Male	1.5
Beta	2	Senior/Senior	Female	1.5
Gamma	1	Senior	Male	1.0
Delta	2	Junior/Junior	Female	0.25

Figure 1. (continued)

Epsilon	2	Junior/Junior	Female	0.25
Zeta	3	Junior/Senior/Junior	Mixed	0.25
Theta	2	Junior/Junior	Male	0.25
Kappa	2	Junior/Alumni	Female	3.0
Lambda	2	Senior/Alumni	Female	0.25
Total	18	—	—	—

### *Surveys*

The online survey sought to corroborate the group leaders' accounts of authentic leadership from the perspective of the group members. Upon clicking the Qualtrics link distributed by their group leader, group members were prompted to sign an online consent form (Appendix D). The rest of the survey completed by group members consisted of two demographic questions, ten 5-point (0 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree) Likert scales, and five open-ended questions (Appendix B). The Likert items aimed to assess group members' thoughts and opinions about their group's climate, as well as the role their group leaders and members played in fostering such an environment. Open-ended questions sought to capture members' more complex perceptions regarding their leader's style and influence on the group climate.

Figure 2.

Small Group Name	Number of Members	Age of Members	Gender of Members	Group Lifespan (years)
Alpha	4	Sophomore	Male	1.5
Beta	5	Junior-Senior	Female	1.5
Gamma	9	Sophomore-Senior	Mixed	1.0
Delta	5	Sophomore-Senior	Female	0.25
Epsilon	11	Freshmen	Female	0.25

Figure 2. (continued)

Zeta	2	Junior	Female	0.25
Theta	5	Freshmen	Male	0.25
Kappa	4	Junior	Female	3.0
Lambda	4	Sophomore/Junior	Female	0.25
Total	49	—	—	—

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Interviews***

Interviews were transcribed and coded for general patterns and themes according to Merriam (2009). Each transcript was first analyzed in order to identify evidence of authentic leadership from small group leaders. Each of the four components of authentic leadership, according to Walumbwa et al. (2008), were considered during the coding process. Additionally, interviews were coded to identify leaders' beliefs and actions regarding their group's goal achievement, and perceived climate of vulnerability, comfort, and trust. Other factors, including age, gender, and group lifespan differences, were considered for additional patterns and themes.

### ***Surveys***

Likert-scale scores and descriptive statistics were computed for individual responses, individual groups' aggregates responses, and the total group aggregated responses. All results from group members' Likert-scale scores were primarily used to corroborate the group leaders' accounts regarding the group's climate, in hopes that providing the group members' points of view would either validate or deconstruct their leaders' interviews. The final five open-ended questions were coded for general patterns

and themes according to Merriam (2009). This section of questions searched for both responses that were negative or that conflicted with group leaders' accounts, as well as for positive comments or affirmations of group leaders' interviews.

### **Trustworthiness**

In attempts to maintain credibility, various aspects of triangulation were pursued. First, a focus group was held the first available night of a Small Group Council meeting after the last survey was completed, with six of the 13 previously interviewed small group leaders present. The aim of the voluntary focus group was to receive feedback from group leaders regarding the general patterns and themes that had emerged from the interviews. Second, a variety of artifacts were collected to provide further insight into specific small group goals and functioning, as well as the leaders' formal leadership training and preparation by the organization.

Although triangulation was used to provide further credibility and confirmability, it is important to note the restrictions that stem from this methodology. A small sample size, limited time in the environment, and a purposeful sampling are notable restrictions that reduce the transferability of these results to a larger context.

## **Chapter 4 – Findings**

There are three sections for this chapter. The first section will establish how the features of authentic leadership were or were not evidenced in group leaders' experiences, specifically via the group leader interviews, focus groups, and artifacts. The second section will evaluate the evidence that corroborated or challenged the group leaders' accounts of features of authentic leadership, as seen by their group members' surveys. The final section will explore various group differences that affected group leaders' and members' perceptions of the components of authentic leadership within their groups.

### **Evidence of Authentic Leadership from Group Leaders' Accounts**

This section will analyze the various ways that group leaders did or did not exhibit aspects of authentic leadership. The four components of authentic leadership, self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective (Walumba et al. 2008), saw varying levels of evidences amongst leaders. Despite some variation in leaders' accounts, common themes and practices among leaders emerged through the data coding process.

#### ***1) Self-Awareness***

Three criteria were utilized in determining whether or not group leaders clearly demonstrated evidence of self-awareness. First, Walumba et al. (2008) asserted that self-awareness is "showing an understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses and the multifaceted nature of the self..." The authors went on to describe how that self-awareness extended to an individual's worldview, causing further impact on one's self-

concept over time. Finally, Kernis (2003) added another nuance to self-awareness, asserting that it included “being cognizant of one’s impact on other people.” Using these complimentary conceptualizations of self-awareness, evidence will be presented regarding the varying levels of self-awareness among the leaders of small groups. In the context of leading small groups, one predominant theme emerged that provided evidence of leaders’ perceived strengths, whereas several other themes stemmed from accounts of leaders’ perceived weaknesses.

### ***1A) Leader Strengths***

Leaders almost unanimously described their strengths in terms of interpersonal communication. Samuel, a co-leader from the Alpha group, exemplified this awareness of his strengths:

“Yeah, strengths I feel I’m good at...leading people in more kind of a one-on-one setting. I’ve never really been good at standing in front of a group and teaching something. But, in a smaller setting, or more intimate setting...I think I’m good at identifying when people are struggling, and encouraging them to open up about that, and then helping them find a way to come out of that.”

This account from Samuel demonstrates a few aspects of his self-awareness. First, there is an understanding that he excels in one-on-one settings as opposed to larger group settings, a clear indication of his own awareness of his strengths and weaknesses. Second, he seems cognizant of the impact that his actions can have on his group members. He asserts that his strengths help his group members to open up and begin helping them work their problems.

Susan, the co-leader of the Beta group, offered additional examples regarding her level of self-awareness:

“I’m pretty good at asking questions. When I know that something is wrong I’m really good at sort of getting to the heart of what it is that they are actually experiencing...[walking] through it step by step. Why do you think that is? Or what do you think is causing that?”

Here, Susan identifies her ability to pinpoint certain areas with which her group members might be struggling. The nature of targeting these vulnerable areas also implies that she understands how she might be able to assist her group members’ needs. Thus, Susan exhibits an awareness of her strengths and how she can utilize them in order to impact her group members.

Other leaders provided further evidence of self-awareness when questioned about their strengths. Lisa, the co-leader of the Kappa group, aptly pinpointed her strengths and how they ultimately shape the group climate:

“I think one of my strengths is that I’m a listener more than a talker, generally. And I want the group to be about them, and what they need, and how they can grow. I feel, like, we’re really open to input and we talk about, like, “How’s this going?” We do a lot of reflection in group. And I feel like Jess and I really use the feedback from our group to adjust things and make it more beneficial. So, I think just being open to criticism and not taking it personally when they’re like, “Oh, this wasn’t helpful at all,” even if it was something that we put a lot of time into. Just focusing on the fact that it’s for them...”

This exposition from Lisa encompasses every facet of the concepts that Walumba et al. (2008) and Kernis (2003) offered. Most recognizable is an understanding of her strengths, that the ability to listen is a key aspect of her leadership and interaction with the group members. Next, Lisa seemed readily to be seeking and open to feedback from group

members. She claimed to use this feedback to constantly update her leadership practices and teachings in order to more fully meet the needs of her group members. Finally, Lisa's response indicates an understanding of her impact as a leader. She seemed clearly cognizant of the influence she had on the group and how her role could make a difference to her group members.

Data collected from the focus group session further strengthened the evidence for a sense of self-awareness, where the second and third criteria were specifically bolstered. First, leaders demonstrated several forms of self-awareness that had impact on their self-concept over time. In this case, nearly all leaders exhibited some form of valuing and regularly seeking and incorporating feedback from their group members and co-leaders. The process of asking for and implementing feedback, I believe, indicated a dynamic, progressive change in self-concept over time. From minor issues such as group meeting structure, to major points such as improving the emotional connectivity and comfort of the group, each group leader provided different ways in which they pursued changes in their self-concept over time. Moreover, group leaders also provided further evidence of "being cognizant of one's impact over other people." One leader in particular captured this idea by recounting the first time she realized that her group really took what she said to heart:

"I first realized I had an impact on my girls when I started hearing them restate specific ideas and phrases that had come up in our lessons. It was early on and everything was still so new that it was hard to tell whether or not they were listening or fully grasping what we were teaching. So that really made me more aware that my words and thoughts really meant something to them, and that I need to pay extra attention to what was coming out of my mouth so I wouldn't lead them astray."

Other leaders echoed her sentiments, sighting early incidents in which they too realized the influence their leadership had on their group's thoughts and discussion.

### ***1B) Leader Weaknesses***

Leader interviews revealed more varied accounts of perceived weaknesses. Approximately 39% of leaders cited some form of interpersonal communication as a weakness, while the other more frequently referenced weaknesses involved passivity/hesitancy (31%) and preparation (23%).

Ironically, 4 of the 11 leaders that identified some aspect of interpersonal communication as their strength also saw it as their greatest weakness. The co-leader of the Delta group, Savannah, explained this phenomenon:

“...my strength is that I've found a good balance of pushing the group forward, but also allowing for people to talk and say what they want to say. I think it's very important for all of the girls to feel like they're listened to and valued, and so I make that a goal....I think the weakness is that I want to be seen as a friend and so I think...I tend on the side of coming off as goofy or too informal, and so...that can sometimes...affect me, how they see me, or if that ends up being my focus rather than being the spiritual leader that I can be...it [might] take us a while to get back into serious mode, even though I [am] trying to say, “We need to get back on track,” they kind of just want to mess around a little bit.”

Savannah's account of her weaknesses (as well as strengths) exemplifies the range of her self-awareness. First, she exhibits self-awareness by understanding the multifaceted nature in which her greatest strength is also her greatest weakness. These strengths and weaknesses are not simple or separate to Savannah, but instead are a picture of the

complexities that result from the intricacy of the human condition. Second, her awareness of the tension that having too much informality or goofiness can contradict her goals as a spiritual leader conveys an active understanding of her worldview. In this case, Savannah sees how problematic this weakness can be in the context of pursuing the spiritual goals that she has in mind for the group. Finally, this account reveals how cognizant Savannah is of her impact on her group members. This weakness in her mind is a potential threat to the way that her group members perceive her, where they see her more as a friend rather than a leader. In light of the spiritual goals she has for the group Savannah realizes how that weakness might compromise her impact on the group.

The second most prevalent weakness mentioned by group leaders was a proclivity for passivity or hesitancy. Rebecca, co-leader of the Epsilon group, talked about this area of weakness:

“I definitely think that I refrain from being too vocal. I’m not taking advantage of making sure that everyone gets the chance to speak because I think that I reflect back to when I was in that place a year ago, and sometimes I was intimidated by others. So I think that I relate too much to them...I feel like I don’t push to include everyone as much as I usually would.”

This account by Rebecca reflects a complex understanding of her weakness. It is not simply a matter of being passive, but rather a matter of failing to engage all the members of the group. Rebecca’s grasp of how her weakness can lead to the exclusion of people is an additional testament to her self-awareness. She recognizes the impact her hesitancy can have on the group, where her sympathizing might actually disregard other’s opinions or commitment to the group.

The final recurrent theme about leader weaknesses surrounded preparation. Lisa, the co-leader of the Kappa group, recounted her weakness in this area:

“...something I struggle with is being really consistent with planning really in depth...sometimes we’re throwing things together at the last minute....Sometimes we get there and Jane and I haven’t put as much time into researching the book that we are reading or the background behind things, there [might] be questions that we haven’t explored....sometimes it does get me down on myself and I’m like, “Oh, I’m not doing this. I suck as a leader....” [or] “We aren’t following through in this way...we’re not investing in them.””

This passage displays Lisa’s multifaceted understanding of her weakness. This lack of preparation clearly caused some anxiety and forced her to evaluate her leadership, demonstrating a deeper level of awareness than simply recognizing that the weakness exists. Additionally, Lisa was cognizant of the impact her weakness had on her group members. Unpreparedness meant to Lisa that they were failing to invest and follow through fully with her group members. Ironically, a vast majority of the Small Group Council meetings and guidance revolved around teaching group leaders different ways to become better prepared. Artifacts from these meetings demonstrated that “preparation is key” and is essential to maintaining a “healthy small group.” Preparation tips ranged from the basic structure and flow of meetings to the ways that a leader could pursue more conceptually challenging content and discussion.

## **2) *Balanced Processing***

This section will use two criteria to analyze evidence for balanced processing of information. First, according to Walumba et. al (2008), *balanced processing* refers to the

objective analysis of all relevant data before coming to a conclusion. The second criterion to this definition of balanced processing necessitates that leaders solicit different perspectives and opinions that challenge their own beliefs. It is important to note that this particular component of authentic leadership likely differed the most by being removed from its original theoretical context in traditional management settings. Specifically, the first criterion of “objective analysis of all relevant data before coming to a conclusion” is potentially more controversial and fluid within a religious setting in which the pursuit of truth or a worldview is likely more subjective. Nonetheless, the two criteria yielded two different themes to evaluate the evidence for balanced processing of information.

### ***2A) Making Conclusions – Subjective, Objective, Mixed***

First, it is important to note the various methods in which group leaders demonstrated “an objective analysis of all relevant data.” Both interviews and focus groups determined that leaders relied on several avenues of research to inform interpretations, prepare for meetings, and answer members’ questions. Some of these “relevant” data sources included: the Bible, online biblical scholars’ articles, Google searches, and one-on-one meetings with the directors of the organization. Before discussing the variability in “coming to conclusions,” it must be noted that the pursuit of “relevant data” was very commonplace.

Some group leaders exhibited mixed tendencies for the “coming to conclusions” aspect of the first criterion. Leaders like Kenny, co-leader of the Alpha group, had less urgency or priority to commit to any conclusions, instead exhibiting more of a curiosity

for "...seeing how everybody's opinion [were] not exactly the same, but how they're still able to come together as a group." In this case, Kenny seemed not particularly interested in deciding what the "truth" is. Rather than decide what he wanted the group to conclude from their meetings, he preferred to embrace the difference in opinion within the group, valuing the subjectivity of the content they were discussing. His search for differing opinions ultimately ended with an acceptance of variance within the group, with the added narrative that their differences did not undermine the group itself.

Other group leaders described a more complex dynamic for coming to conclusions. In particular, these leaders were characterized by grappling with the tension between what they saw were "absolute truths" and "gray areas." Some of these leaders explicitly stated that several of their conclusions were non-negotiable "truths," rather than presenting it as one interpretation of many valid conclusions. Karen, from the Beta group exemplifies this orientation of making conclusions:

"...that's more my role than Susan's role as a leader, of being able to tell someone especially theologically when they're not making sense. That's one of the hardest things of "No, let's look at scripture. That's not actually correct." And so I would say that I try to do that with sincerity, but sometimes it has rubbed people the wrong way....I think that there's only so far you can express your discontent for theology that relates to [a certain] topic, to where sometimes people just have to figure it out themselves."

This type of thinking reflects the "objective" nature of some leaders' opinions and conclusions. Yet, other instances yielded a third type of attitude towards conclusions,

steeped in nuance and shades of gray. Overall, leaders more frequently adopted this mixed attitude toward coming to conclusions, displaying a more calculated reluctance for deeming something as “objective truth.” These leaders freely acknowledged their uncertainty, yet admitted there were certain topics where “absolute truth” was ascertainable and essential to be conveyed to their group members. Thus, evidence for the first criterion of balanced processing was complicated by aspects of this first definition.

### ***2B) Soliciting Different Perspectives***

Unlike the first criterion, evidence for the second criterion of balanced processing of information was much clearer. Overall, group leaders were very comfortable with soliciting different perspectives from their groups and regularly incorporated different ways to draw from these differences in their meetings. For example, Jenny explained how after each main talk during their meeting (the message), she and her co-leader had incorporated specific questions to assess their group’s different perspectives, such as: “What parts of the message did you disagree with?” or “What parts did you not like, and why?” Further, most group leaders claimed to express repeatedly the idea that “it is okay to disagree with us,” in attempts to reiterate the importance and value they had in hearing and discussing differences in opinions. Although a few leaders did express that the nature of some topics for a given semester might not be geared towards discussion of differing perspectives, they made it clear that they regularly attempted to capitalize on opportunities to solicit differing perspectives if they believed it would enrich and advance

the chosen topic. Thus, ample evidence for the second criterion of balanced processing of information was provided.

### ***3) Relational Transparency***

This section will employ a single criterion to determine evidence of relational transparency. According to Walumba et al. (2008), relational transparency involves presenting one's authentic self. Rather than falsely representing oneself to others, this open behavior embodies the sharing of truthful information and feelings. Evidence for this aspect of authentic leadership was abundant throughout each and every interview. Relational transparency proved to be the most naturally referenced and possibly most heavily practiced component of authentic leadership for every small group leader in the organization. Thus, small group leaders offered numerous accounts of relational transparency.

A unique exposition from the Lambda co-leader Rita detailed her motivation to incorporate relational transparency into her leadership:

“I mean [authenticity], I think it's what makes...me a believable leader or a “followable” leader. I know personally I have a very hard time following or submitting to anyone who's not authentic or who I think is faking something or putting on a face. So I think my ability to be transparent before my group is what allow[s] me to be able to effectively lead [and] influence, and really play the role in their lives that I am supposed to play.”

To Rita, presenting her authentic self was the only option because she had a history of distrust for leaders who appeared inauthentic. She asserted that transparency was key to

effective leadership and allowed her to make the impact that she believed she could have with her group. Thus, relational transparency was of paramount importance to Rita.

Additionally, most group leaders viewed relational transparency as an essential dynamic to promote from the very beginning of their group. Here, Samuel explained how and why he decided to value authenticity early on:

“I try to be as authentic as I can and encourage the guys to do the same. And I think that’s what, like early on, I tried to be intentional about sharing things that were going on in my life, like difficult struggles that I was going through...I tried to set the example for the guys, as far as what it looks like to be authentic with people...[For example], I tried to be really honest about good things that my dad did in teaching me...and then also ways that I felt like he didn’t do so well. And I think being really honest about that really encouraged the guys to do the same when they shared...”

This early goal to establish relational transparency from the get-go was universal. Most groups had written and signed “covenants” or “vision statements” that cited aspects such as, “promoting vulnerability” and “establishing a community of openness and trust.”

These documents were typically conceptualized and signed within a few weeks of the first group meeting. In this case, Samuel believed that to achieve the vulnerability for which the group strived, he must be open about his own struggles from the beginning. Thus, Samuel’s active pursuit of openness and honesty about himself demonstrated a high level of relational transparency.

Finally, some group leaders detailed how joyous and freeing it was for them to value relational transparency with their group:

Susan: "...I think it's really important to be open because they're sharing their lives with me, so how can I not share my own? And I think it's a really beautiful part of the group is that I can be vulnerable as a leader, and that they can learn that you don't have to be perfect if you are in charge of things."

In Susan's eyes, there was not an alternative way to lead her group other than with openness and honesty about her life. Not only was this important to her, but she believed that simply the act of being vulnerable herself was "a beautiful part of the group," freeing her from having to feel the need to appear flawless or always have the answers.

To add further support to the amount of importance placed on relational transparency by the group leaders, artifacts collected from individual group "covenants" and Small Group Council meetings demonstrated various ways that leaders were intentionally prepared to value and exhibit relational transparency. Most groups documented their support for relational transparency through their signed group covenants:

**Authentic Christian Community**

- We will create an environment that is loving, supportive, encouraging, and free of judgement.
- We will share fully and honestly with the group every week.
- We will protect the hearts of group members through confidentiality.
- We will faithfully speak out challenges the Lord places on our hearts.

Additionally, one training session adapted from "Leading Life-Changing Small Groups" specifically embodied this organization-wide perspective on the importance of relational transparency:

“Vulnerable, authentic, truthful communication among group members will enable your group to become a powerful vehicle for life change. Groups grow when members express feelings, words of encouragement, or hurts to one another....Groups characterized by truth-telling are groups that experience freedom in Christ. When members speak loving, caring truths to one another, groups avoid becoming superficial and pretentious.”

This training session artifact was a fitting capstone to the overwhelming evidence of the positive value and role that relational transparency had in the eyes of each small group leader.

#### ***4) Internalized Moral Perspective***

To establish evidence of internalized moral perspective, this section will use the Ryan and Deci (2003) definition for its single criterion. This definition refers to internalized moral perspective as an internalized and integrated form of self-regulation. Specifically, leaders use these internal moral standards as a guide (as opposed to various external influences) to inform and direct their behavior. Evidence for this final component of authentic leadership was also abundant through interviews. One of the core goals that leaders had for their small groups was to strengthen their group members' internalized moral perspective and equip them with the tools they needed to thrive amidst the various external pressures of the world. Thus, leaders provided multiple examples of an internalized moral perspective.

Again, one of the core activities of each small group was reading, discussing, and thinking through life applications that came from either biblical passages or other Christian books. Group leaders frequently emphasized to the group how important building and maintaining certain habits and mindsets were for their spiritual and personal

growth. Kenny, co-leader of the Alpha group, explained some of the ways that he and Samuel attempted to promote the internalization of certain practices and values in their group members:

“...[we ask] that they would be willing to commit every week to everything, like scripture, and any assignments like books that we thought would be helpful in order for them to grow in their faith. And just that they would commit to creating good habits, in terms of faith, like reading scripture, praying regularly and just attending church...And not [just] leaving what we teach [here]...but that they take what we teach with them and actually use it in their everyday lives...”

For Kenny, these habits were the essential building blocks for constructing an internalized moral perspective. Regular prayer, reading the Bible, and attending church were active ways his group members (and he himself) maintained a moral perspective steeped in Christian thought. Susan, from the Beta group offered further detail about how this internalized moral perspective should dictate group members’ behavior in the group setting:

“...it all goes back to the idea that we wanna honor God with everything that we do. So, if we say we’re gonna do something we do it. We encourage each other, we don’t put each other down...and if things are said in the group then they stay in the group. We recognize that our actions and our words have consequences, and so we make sure that they are God-honoring and that [we] respect each other...”

Susan’s account sheds lights on how these moral standards informed both her and the group’s behavior. This guiding principle for the group’s thoughts and actions was that it must be “God-honoring.” In this case, Susan applied this internalized moral standard to

how she and her group encouraged each other, maintained trust in each other, and inform their behavior with one another. Demanding that everyone's actions and words reflect this internalized moral standard shows how important these values were to Susan, providing clear evidence for internalized moral perspective.

Finally, Lisa expands further upon the reach of her internalized moral perspective, as she explained how she and her co-leader abided by that perspective:

"...our vision is to create a safe and intimate community where we can grow closer to God and one another. We commit to respecting, understanding, and supporting each other. We believe we are all equal partners, and we are all in need of healing...I [try] modeling the values that we want to support, a sense of acceptance and belonging in the group, and just making sure everybody feels like that can share honestly and openly without being judged....when [we] see things straying from that vision, Jane and I pull the group back to what we originally committed to."

In addition to valuing a respectful, understanding, and supportive community, Lisa also conveyed that understanding the need for healing and belonging is a core component of her belief system. To promote this healing and belonging within her group, Lisa relied on the importance of openness, honesty, and a non-judgmental atmosphere. It is these tenets of Lisa's values and behavior that provide further evidence for her high internalized moral perspective.

Multiple artifacts were collected that lend further support to the high moral standards exhibited by group leaders. First, in order to become a leader, each individual had to pass an interview with the directors of the organization. Artifacts collected demonstrated several of the key agreements that group leaders made with the directors of

the organization prior to becoming a leader, in what is known as a “leadership council covenant.” For example, part of this agreement included “being a good witness through [your] words, actions, and thoughts including: socially, sexually, and with substances.” Specifically, this meant, “treating others with love, compassion, and respect...being sexually pure in relationships, media outlets, and thoughts...” and also “[refraining] from underage drinking or excessive/irresponsible drinking” if one was of legal drinking age. In addition to the organizational agreement, or “Council Covenant,” that leaders were required to uphold, each individual group constructed their own covenant that conveyed their group’s vision and ethics.

### ***Evidence of Authentic Leadership from Group Members’ Accounts***

This section will explore the evidence provided by group members’ surveys regarding their leaders’ exhibition of authentic leadership, as well as their perceptions on various aspects of the group’s climate. Overall, survey data collected from group members widely supported their group leaders’ accounts.

#### ***1) Self-Awareness***

Surveys partially supported group leaders’ perceptions of their self-awareness. Group-wide Likert averages indicated that almost all group members (94%) believed that their group leaders helped them achieve their own personal goals ( $\bar{x}_{12} = 4.24$ ). In addition, the majority of group members (94%) also indicated that their group leaders helped their group achieve their group’s goals ( $\bar{x}_{13} = 4.35$ ). The overall perception that

the leaders helped members achieve their individual and group goals might support some leaders' claims of self-awareness. Specifically, several leaders indicated how they sought feedback from their groups in order to serve their members' needs better and help them achieve their goals. Group members' confirmation of this goal achievement seemed to lend support to the constant self-evaluative approach that leaders described.

### ***2) Balanced Processing of Information***

Surveys partially supported group leaders' perceptions of a balanced processing of information. Although differences existed in the type of conclusions that were ultimately drawn by group leaders, most group leaders believed that they frequently solicited differing perspectives and opinions from their group members, a key aspect to this component of authentic leadership. Group-wide Likert averages indicated that the majority of group members (83%) agreed that their group leaders invited differing opinions ( $\bar{x}_{11} = 4.37$ ). Additionally, most group members also (88%) agreed that the group's atmosphere invited differing opinions ( $\bar{x}_{10} = 4.37$ ). Thus, group members' responses seemed to validate their leaders' perceptions that they frequently solicit differing perspectives and opinions, a key aspect of balanced processing of information.

### ***3) Relational Transparency***

A combination of group members' Likert and open-ended responses lent support to group leaders' testimonies regarding relational transparency. First, group-wide Likert averages indicated that almost all group members felt comfortable sharing their perspective with both their fellow group members (100%) and leaders (97%), even if they

disagreed with them ( $\bar{x}_4 = 4.57$ ;  $\bar{x}_5 = 4.63$ ). Further, group members predominantly agreed that they frequently express their ideas to their fellow group members' (88%) and leaders' (86%) comments during group meetings ( $\bar{x}_8 = 4.14$ ;  $\bar{x}_9 = 4.03$ ). This high level of comfort shared by group members seemed to support their leaders' beliefs that they actively work to establish a safe, secure, and open environment of authentic expression.

Additionally, open-ended responses provided a more detailed account of group members' experiences with their leaders' relational transparency. Several responses indicated that the level of comfort was due to their group having a "culture of openness," a "freedom to express opinions," or a "culture of vulnerability." Not only were members comfortable thanks to their leaders, but they also believed that their leaders were "super," "very highly," or "extremely" authentic. Group members explained that their leaders "don't pretend to have it all together or know all the answers," and that they "never feel [like] they're trying to be someone they're not for us." Group members frequently characterized their leaders as "open," "flexible," "great listeners," and "willing to share." One member even shared her transformation from the beginning of the group, stating the she used to be "apprehensive about sharing but [she] has since gotten to know the other girls well and feel a sense of safety within the group." Thus, group members' attitudes seemed to validate their leaders' perceptions of high relational transparency.

#### ***4) Internalized Moral Perspective***

A combination of group members' Likert and open-ended responses lent support to group leaders' perceptions of a high internalized moral perspective. Group-wide Likert averages indicated that a majority of group members felt that their opinion was valued by both their fellow group members (94%) and leaders (100%) ( $\bar{x}_6 = 4.43$ ;  $\bar{x}_7 = 4.63$ ). Group members' open-ended responses indicated that their leaders would "lead by example" and acted "as if [they] were all a team instead of them being above the rest of us." Others conveyed that their leaders were "very respectful" of their opinions, "even if they disagreed." These member accounts provide further evidence that leaders lived up to their high moral standards. By demonstrating respect and leading by example, group leaders appear to have strived to fulfill their leadership council covenant, as well as their own individual group covenants.

### ***Explanation for Lack of Group Differences***

The evidence for authentic leadership in this religious organization was surprisingly one-sided. Various attempts to examine group leader and member differences via gender, group lifespan, and school year yielded no significant differences either in the leader interviews or member Likert mean scores.

One plausible explanation for the lack of group differences may lie in the unified spiritual purpose that each group shared. Although a common purpose is typical within many organizations, perhaps something about the commitment and value placed on a group's purpose in a religious organization provides a more significant unifying force for leaders and members. Although many organizations (i.e., Habit for Humanity, the Bill

and Melinda Gates Foundation, etc.) embody powerful positive messages and have positive influences in the world, it seems less common for a non-spiritual organization to unite its diverse members around a singular worldview. However, within a religious organization, this is nearly always the common denominator. Members and leaders have diverse backgrounds and perspectives, yet their motivations for meeting are to cultivate and share their experiences about a way of life. They meet to share their experiences of living as a spiritual being. Their very rhetoric is influenced by the theology and sacred texts they study and discuss. They construct and pursue meaning together through a unified lens, routinely reflecting with each other on how their situation fits within a divine plan and purpose. This distinct unifying force of spirituality seems to set apart any meaningful differences between groups within the organization.

## Chapter 5 – Discussion

Despite the change in setting, authentic leadership as a construct first established in the management literature appeared to be evident in many ways. Not only was there ample evidence for the features of authentic leadership, but an overall positive perception about the group climate persisted throughout group leader and group member data. Given the high incidence of the components of authentic leadership in this setting, a few possible explanations of various relationships that authentic leadership has with other outcomes might be able to unpack this positivity. Specifically, several studies have investigated the relationship between authentic leadership and voice behavior, as well as mediators in the relationship such as psychological safety and leader-member exchange (LMX) quality.

Although voice behavior was also conceived and situated within an organizational context, the same connections it has to authentic leadership may also apply in the religious small group domain. Again, voice, according to Detert and Burris (2007), is “the discretionary provision of information intended to improve organizational functioning to someone inside an organization with the perceived authority to act, even though such information may challenge and upset the status quo of the organization and its power holders...” Although the leaders in this context technically are “power holders,” this is admittedly less the case in the studied small group setting, as no pay or livelihood was at stake. However, group leaders in this context were certainly individuals with “the perceived authority to act,” and there was clearly enough structure, discussion, and content that might formulate the perception of a “status quo.” Thus, the potential for

group members to perceive risks in speaking up certainly existed in this domain as well. Although no direct measures of voice behavior were collected, it is reasonable to speculate that the overall comfort explained by group leaders and members is some indication of a higher than normal level of voice behavior. Future studies could easily adapt the measures of voice from LePine and Van Dyne (2003) or others to assess this relationship in this new domain.

Psychological safety is one notable mediator between authentic leadership and voice behavior that may also have contributed to the highly positive perceptions of the group climate I found. Psychological safety in the management context refers to an employee's belief regarding how safe it is to engage in risky behaviors, one such risky behavior being voice. Enacting voice typically involves a critique, directly or indirectly, of current practices or ideals, with leaders most often being the target due to their greater ability to change the status quo. Yet, challenging leaders who have demonstrated an unwillingness to receive input from subordinates has proven a difficult path for most employees to pursue (Hornstein, 1986). In the context of this study's setting, leaders almost universally made it a point to convey that little real risk was involved for engaging in these types of "risky" communication. Most groups even had this policy formally stated within their group "covenant" or "vision statement." Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that such an enhanced sense of psychological safety brought about by authentic leadership was the norm of each small group, ultimately having a positive influence on their group members' voice behavior.

An additional mediator in the management literature between authentic leadership and voice behavior is LMX quality. A high quality LMX relationship, according to Dienesch and Liden (1986), is one in which the “leaders and subordinates transcend their formal role requirements, treating each other as close partners” (Hsiung, 2011). Given the value that the studied group leaders placed on establishing vulnerability, trust, and openness, it is reasonable to predict that the authentic leadership displayed in this setting could have positively impacted their group members’ voice behavior.

### **Limitations**

This study was not without limitations. First, my prior experience with this specific organization and its informants may have biased some of the data. Specifically, prior history with informants and experiences with the organization may have influenced the positive themes. Additionally, I did not use the validated Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) by Walumba et al. (2008), which would have provided a different, possibly clearer, measure of authentic leadership with which to compare to existing data in the management literature. Further, the quantitative data collected could have reverse-engineered the ALQ for group members to get a more accurate assessment of their feelings to specific authentic leadership dimensions. Finally, further qualitative measures could have been used. Specifically, interviews with each group member would have provided a more comprehensive account of their perceptions of group leaders’ practices of authentic leadership. Additionally, interviewing the organization’s directors might have provided supplemental evidence for training procedures and organizational values that flow from the directors to the group leaders.

## **Implications for Future Research**

Future research can work to extend these findings in a variety of ways. One manner in which to increase the support for these findings would be to investigate authentic leadership in different religious and spiritual systems outside Christianity. Perhaps certain values and practices in other religious systems, such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, may offer increased support for the application of authentic leadership into this religious organizational realm. Providing further evidence for this theory across several religions and spiritualities would bolster the overall applicability of this theory across disciplines. Additionally, the racial demographics of this study were relatively lacking in diversity. Acquiring evidence from races and ethnicities outside of White and Hispanic would also widen the breadth of these findings. Additionally, considering the likely higher than average socioeconomic status of the student sample (as members of a prestigious 4-year university), investigating more socioeconomically diverse populations would strengthen these findings.

Although the quality of leadership across all life settings can vary greatly, the rise of the internet and social media have amplified the consequences of poor leadership. Leopold (2015) detailed some recent popular examples of public shaming through social media, highlighting the volatile and unforgiving nature that this current age has for any individual who makes a remotely unethical or politically incorrect remark or action. Although Treviño & Brown (2004) argue that the human capacity for unethical behavior has remained largely unchanged over human history, the advent of social media has equipped this highly reactive and sensitive populace with the means to oust and ridicule

mistakes by individuals and organizations alike quickly and efficiently. Thus, the intense scrutiny of leadership in the current day calls for greater standards and training of leaders in order to mitigate the potential individual and organizational damage that stem from a wide variety of poor decisions from any tier of leadership.

Future applications of authentic leadership across disciplines will continue to add breadth and depth to its existing literature. By exploring the intricacies of each new setting, increasing the footprint of the construct of authentic leadership may bring about further positive changes and evaluations of leadership. Perhaps in time, the original theory of authentic leadership itself may be re-evaluated and re-informed thanks to more rigorous testing in other settings and disciplines.

## Figures

Figure 1.

Small Group Name	Number of Leaders	Age of Leaders	Gender of Leaders	Group Lifespan (years)
Alpha	2	Senior/Alumni	Male	1.5
Beta	2	Senior/Senior	Female	1.5
Gamma	1	Senior	Male	1.0
Delta	2	Junior/Junior	Female	0.25
Epsilon	2	Junior/Junior	Female	0.25
Zeta	3	Junior/Senior/Junior	Mixed	0.25
Theta	2	Junior/Junior	Male	0.25
Kappa	2	Junior/Alumni	Female	3.0
Lambda	2	Senior/Alumni	Female	0.25
Total	18	—	—	—

Figure 2.

Small Group Name	Number of Members	Age of Members	Gender of Members	Group Lifespan (years)
Alpha	4	Sophomore	Male	1.5
Beta	5	Junior-Senior	Female	1.5
Gamma	9	Sophomore-Senior	Mixed	1.0
Delta	5	Sophomore-Senior	Female	0.25
Epsilon	11	Freshmen	Female	0.25
Zeta	2	Junior	Female	0.25
Theta	5	Freshmen	Male	0.25
Kappa	4	Junior	Female	3.0
Lambda	4	Sophomore/Junior	Female	0.25
Total	49	—	—	—

Figure 3.

Question	Mean Likert Score (Total Responses)
4	4.57
5	4.63
6	4.43
7	4.63
8	4.14
9	4.03
10	4.37
11	4.37
12	4.24
13	4.35

Figure 4.

Question	Mean Likert Score (Males)	Mean Likert Score (Females)
4	4.53	4.63
5	4.65	4.63
6	4.47	4.41
7	4.59	4.67
8	4.12	4.11
9	3.94	4.00
10	4.29	4.52
11	4.29	4.48
12	4.00	4.31
13	4.38	4.38

Figure 5.

Question	Mean Likert Score (Freshmen)	Mean Likert Score (Sophomores)	Mean Likert Score (Juniors)	Mean Likert Score (Seniors*)
4	4.50	4.40	4.78	4.54
5	4.63	4.40	4.78	4.62
6	4.75	4.20	4.33	4.38
7	4.75	4.40	4.56	4.69
8	4.38	4.00	4.33	3.92
9	4.25	3.60	4.44	3.77
10	4.00	4.20	4.67	4.46
11	4.38	4.20	4.67	4.23
12	4.43	3.80	4.11	4.42
13	4.25	4.00	4.56	4.42

## Appendix

### Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How long have you led your current group?
2. What is the predominant classification of group members (freshman, sophomores, etc)?
3. What other leadership roles have you had?
4. How aware are you of your own strengths and weaknesses?
5. How often do you think about your own strength's and weaknesses amidst leading? If so, why?
6. How aware are you of your group members' strengths and weaknesses?
7. How often do you think of your group members' strengths/weaknesses amidst leading? If so, why?
8. How open are you about your own experiences with your group?
9. How open is your group about their own experiences?
10. Describe what role and value, if any, that trust plays in your group.
  1. Conditional: What actions do you personally take to promote trust? How did it develop?
13. How do you manage the various personalities in the group?
14. How do you think your leadership style influences the group's conversations and activities?
15. How do you think your group would characterize your leadership style?
16. How comfortable are you to express unpopular opinions to the group?
17. How comfortable do you believe the group is in expressing unpopular opinions?
18. How would you define authenticity?
19. What role, if any, do you see authenticity playing in your leadership?

## Appendix B: Survey Questions

Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. Select your small group.

2. Select your classification.

- 5-Item Likert Scale

(1- Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly Agree)

3. I feel comfortable sharing my perspective with other group members, even if we disagree.

4. I feel comfortable sharing my perspective with my group leader(s), even if we disagree.

5. I feel that my opinion is valued by my fellow group members.

6. I feel that my opinion is valued by my group leader(s).

7. During group meetings, I frequently express my ideas in response to other group members' comments.

8. During group meetings, I frequently express my ideas in response to my group leader(s) comments

9. The group's atmosphere invites differing opinions.

10. The group leader(s) invite(s) differing opinions.

11. My group leader(s) help(s) me achieve my personal goals.

12. My group leader(s) help(s) the group achieve our group goals.

- Open-ended Questions

13. Describe why you do or do not feel comfortable expressing your opinion in the group.

14. How has/have your group leader(s) influenced your level of comfort within the group?

15. How would you describe the leadership style of your leader(s)?

16. How would you describe what it means to be an authentic leader?

17. In the spirit of your definition, describe the level of authenticity of your leader(s).

## Appendix C: Face-to-Face Consent Form

IRB Approval Number: [XXXXX]

### CONSENT FORM Small Group Leadership Study

You are invited to participate in a study on group leadership. The study is being conducted by Alex Forbis and Diane L. Schallert, Professor and faculty sponsor. We are in the Department of Educational Psychology of the University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station, D5800 George Sanchez Bldg. 504 Austin, TX 78712-0383. Alex's email address is alexforbis@gmail.com and Diane's is dschallert@austin.utexas.edu.

The purpose of this study is to explore the concept and role of leadership on individual and group functioning. Your participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding of the role that leadership plays in facilitating group work. You are free to contact us at the above email address to discuss the study or to ask any questions. Your participation will consist of contributing to one kind of data: a face-to-face interview. In the interview, we will ask you some questions about your experiences as a leader, and the extent to which authenticity shapes your leadership. The interview session will also be audio recorded. By agreeing to the study, you are agreeing to be audiotaped. Your name will never be used in the research (pseudonyms or codes will be used only). Your privacy and the confidentiality of the data including the audio files of the interview will be protected by the fact that you will never be referred to by your real name and we will take every precaution to protect your identity by obscuring details of your background that might be too revealing. Also, the audiofile will be stored on a secure and password protected computer and will be accessible only to us, the researchers. The audio recordings will be labeled in pseudonyms as well. We may contact you during the data analysis phase with follow-up questions.

If it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review the study records, information that can be linked to you will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your research records will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order. The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate it with you.

The total amount of time you will possibly be involved in this research is no more than 1 hour (note that you may quit the interview at any time). Risks to participants are considered minimal, no more than is true for everyday life. There will be no cost for participating, nor will you benefit directly from participating. No monetary compensation is being offered for your participation in this study. Only the members of our research team will have access to the data during data collection.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer any question. You can refuse to participate or stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you wish to withdraw from the study, simply stop and let us know. Withdrawal will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas in any way. Or, if you have any questions, contact any of the investigators listed above. Also, if you decide at this point that you do not want to participate, you do not need to reply back to us. If you have any questions, please call or email Diane L. Schallert (471-0784) [dschallert@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:dschallert@austin.utexas.edu). This study has been processed by the Office of Research Support. If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - the Office of Research Support by phone at (512) 471-8604 or email at [orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu](mailto:orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu).

If you agree to participate, please sign below.

***You will be given a copy of this form for your records***

***Statement of consent:***

I have read the above information and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in this study. I consent to participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of participant                      Signature of participant                      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of investigator                      Signature of investigator                      Date

## Appendix D: Online Consent Form

### Small Group Leadership Study

You are invited to participate in a research study on leadership in a religious organization. The study is being conducted by Alex Forbis, graduate student, [alexforbis@gmail.com](mailto:alexforbis@gmail.com), and Diane L. Schallert, Professor and faculty sponsor, Department of Educational Psychology of the University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station, D5800 George Sanchez Bldg. 504 Austin, TX 78712-0383, [dschallert@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:dschallert@austin.utexas.edu).

The purpose of this study is to explore the concept and role of leadership on individual and group functioning. Your participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding of the role that leadership plays in facilitating group work. You are free to contact us at the above email addresses to discuss the study or to ask any questions. Your participation will consist of filling out a survey delivered online. The total amount of time you will possibly be involved in this research is about 30 minutes.

Risks to participants are considered minimal, no more than is true for everyday life. There will be no cost for participating, nor will you benefit directly from participating. Only the members of our research team will have access to the data during data collection. Any personal information such as name or e-mail will not be asked during the survey. The data will be stored on a password-protected computer in a locked office.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer any question. You can refuse to participate or stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you wish to withdraw from the study, simply stop and let us know. Or, if you have any questions, contact any of the investigators listed above. Also, if you decide at this point that you do not want to participate, simply you do not need to reply back to us. If you have any questions, please call or email Alex Forbis (940-389-9785) [alexforbis@gmail.com](mailto:alexforbis@gmail.com).

If you agree to participate, please click on the button below.

*You may make a copy of this form for your records*

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