God’s Call in Our Lives

Cultivating a Culture of Call

By Glenn Ethridge

Includes

Student Resource
Leader Guide

STUDENT RESOURCE

Vocation means much more than where I work, what I do, and how big my paycheck is. Vocation means to live out one’s divine call. When someone speaks of God’s call on our lives, we usually think only of ordained clergy, but God’s call is to all people. The United Methodist Book of Discipline says God “calls all people to receive the gift of salvation and to follow in the way of love and service.” That means that everyone has a call from God. The Greek word for church is ekklesia which means “out of calling.” So the church is a collection of people who gather out of a sense of God’s calling. Factory workers and doctors, salespeople and lawyers, engineers and day laborers all have a divine calling. We might think of this sense of calling as the general call of all Christians. We are called to profess faith, live a holy life, and proclaim justice for all people.

Everyone has a general call, but throughout history, God has called some people to special roles. The biblical witness includes many stories of more specific callings. Those divine calls opened doors of great possibility and also demanded sacrifices from people.

Genesis 12:1-5 - Abraham’s call
Exodus 3 and 4 - Moses’ call
Isaiah 6 - Isaiah’s call
Luke 1:26-56 - Mary’s call
Matthew 4:18-22 - Simon Peter and Andrew’s call
Acts 9:1-22 - Paul’s Conversion/Call

A BISHOP’S CALL

I first felt God leading me toward ordained ministry when I was 16. A pastor, Dr. Sewell Woodward, preached in my church and clearly issued a call for us to pray about God’s calling upon our lives. When he asked for a response - I went forward to pray at the altar.

For the next 13 years I struggled with my call. I even went to seminary, dropped out, and seven years later returned to school. After numerous detours I was finally at peace with God’s call upon my life. Of course, over the past 30 years that calling has been reaffirmed. I can’t think of a better way to spend my life than in proclaiming and living the Gospel as a pastor.

Bishop Lindsey Davis
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Adult Sunday School Resource

Early in the development of the church, followers of Jesus identified some persons within the church as having calls for specialized ministry. These were persons who exhibited strong faith and gifts. The early church affirmed their faith and gifts as evidence of God’s work in their lives, and asked them to serve as leaders in the church. Those who sensed God’s call to specialized ministry and received the affirmation of the community became leaders in the church—preaching, praying, serving, and ordering the missional life of the church.

The early church, through the laying on of hands, identified persons called to preach, teach, nurture and heal. As the church developed, the laying on of hands transformed into what is now known as ordination. We believe that ordination is a gift from God to the church. In ordination, the church affirms and continues the apostolic ministry through persons empowered by the Holy Spirit for specialized ministries. Today, the United Methodist Church ordains Elders (sometimes called Presbyters in other traditions) for ministries of Word, Order, Sacrament and Service. The United Methodist Church also ordains Deacons for ministries of Word and Service.

The church takes ordination very seriously, and the process for being ordained is lengthy and challenging. There are two important prerequisites to ordination. First, a person must sense God’s call in his/her life to a specialized ministry of Elder (Word, Order, Sacrament and Service) or Deacon (Word and Service). People often experience that sense of calling through study of the scripture, prayer, or the direct encouragement of a pastor or other spiritual leader. The second step is that the church must affirm a person’s call. The affirmation of the call takes place throughout an extended process of prayerful study, interviews, seminary education, and ordination exams. This process examines the inward and outward call of God.

The inward call is a private calling that may be difficult to discern. For some the call evolves slowly over time, and for others the call comes in a single moment. People sensing a call pray to God, struggle with God, and dialogue with pastors and other spiritual leaders. As persons gain more clarity about their inward call, they seek the affirmation of the outward call through the discernment of church leaders. The outward call tests the inward call against the gifts for ministry a person may possess and the discernment of lay and clergy leaders within the church. Discerning the outward call is done with church leaders and includes prayer, interviews, education, oversight and consultation. When a person hears the inward call, confirmed by the outward call of the church, the Board of Ordained Ministry recommends that person to the Bishop for ordination.

“As I reflect on God’s call in my life to ordained ministry, I realize that I’m not sure which came first—God’s outer call or God’s inner call. I grew up as an active member of Conyers First UMC where my gifts for Christian leadership were affirmed, nurtured and reinforced. As I experienced and grew in the love and nurture of that community of faith, God’s inner call began to speak to me, pulling me towards ordained service in the church of Jesus Christ. If I had not experienced the confirmation of my home church that I received during my formative years, I may not have understood, been open to or even heard God’s inner call. I thank God for the call that began first through the Christian adults in my life who encouraged me in the faith and provided a place to experience Christian leadership.”

Alice Rogers, Elder
Director of Teaching Parish, Candler School of Theology
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Although people often resist the call to ordained ministry, faithfully living one’s call to ordained ministry is joy-filled. God gives us particular gifts for ministry and a passion in the heart that help us meet the needs of the world. Frederick Buechner says that we find our calling where our “deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” As we seek to discover our call, we look at the gifts God has given us, the hurt we see in the world, and try to discover where our passion and gifts can best be used in the world.

To claim a divine calling is bold. Surely his friends howled in laughter as Noah constructed an ark for a yet unseen flood. Sarah, in her old age, chuckled at the possibility that she, though barren, would be mother to generations as innumerable as the grains of sand on the seashore. Most folks sensing a call to ordained ministry experience great self-doubt. Moses complained that he lacked the requisite speaking skills to plead Israel’s case before Pharaoh, and Jeremiah said he was only a boy. But, just as we believe God calls the equipped, we also believe that God equips the called. Throughout the scriptures, God says “Fear not for I am with you,” and in Philippians we find the assurance that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” As we explore our own sense of calling and our fear of inadequacy for the challenges at hand, we too hear the word of the Lord that says “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

CLERGY SHORTAGE

The United Methodist Church has a critical shortage of ordained clergy. The shortage of ordained clergy under the age of 35 is acute. To fill the gaps left by too few ordained clergy the church has increased the use of licensed local pastors, persons who sense God’s call to specialized ministry but do not earn a seminary degree. The Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary studied clergy age trends from 1985-2005. The study found that over the 20 year study period, the number of ordained elders decreased from 21,378 to 18,141. The number of elders under the age of 35 decreased from 3,219 to 850. Meanwhile, the number of licensed local pastors increased from 3,804 to 6,517, and the number of licensed local pastors under the age of 35 increased from 130 to 317. The decrease in ordained clergy represents a crisis and an opportunity for the church. Although intergenerational ministry is important, the church needs young people who can best speak to emerging generations. Where one might see a crisis, another might see an opportunity for God’s next great work! The God who took the crisis of the enslavement of Israel to Egypt as an opportunity to bring liberation to the oppressed can also use a shortage of young ordained clergy to awaken the church and revive the next generation.

From the time I started first grade, I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. When I was a freshman in high school, I discovered that I had a love of music, and had an experience wherein I believe God called me to study music education in college. I was so convinced of this call that I did just that, and graduated from college with a degree in music education. However, I always felt that something wasn’t quite right, and I was restless and unsure of my chosen career, particularly as graduation loomed closer.

After graduation, I tried and tried to get a job, but was rejected time and time again. I spent a very difficult summer struggling with my future, and relying heavily on God for answers. During this time, I also began volunteering with the youth ministry at my church, and over time, came to realize that the time I was spending in ministry was the time I felt most content and most at peace. I slowly discovered that God was calling me to connect the things I’d always loved; music, education, and the church, and to be in full time ministry with teenagers. Once I accepted my call to ministry, I experienced a peace and assurance that I had never known, and it is this assurance that keeps me grounded through all of the joys and sorrows of my work and my life.

Laura Rappold
Deacon. Minister to Youth at Decatur First UMC
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LEADER’S GUIDE

Lesson Outline

1. Open with prayer.

2. Provide participants with the study material prior to the event, asking them to read the paper and mark those parts that are of most interest. (5 minutes)

3. How might God use the current shortage of young Elders to strengthen the church? (5 minutes)

   Divide into Small Groups

4. Ask each small group to read one or more of the biblical passages that speak about calling. (10 minutes)

5. How do you sense God’s calling in your life? How do you know it’s God and not your own self-will? (10 minutes)

6. Recognizing that all persons—ordained and laity—have a life vocation, how do you think God might best use your gifts? (10 minutes)

7. Is there a young person in your life whom you think God may be calling to ordained ministry? How could you mentor, encourage and pray for this person?

   Bring group back together

8. What was the most important thing you learned or experienced today? (5 minutes)


I am a child of the Methodist movement. My mother made sure I was brought up and nurtured in the Christian faith. I have never known a time when I didn’t know Jesus. My faith was formed in Sunday school and Worship. I learned the great hymns, creeds and biblical stories from my early childhood and continuing. As I grew in stature, I grew in faith. Fortunately, Godly people taught, chaperoned, and cared for my person and my spiritual life. Like many, I was baptized as an infant and confirmed in the fifth grade. However, it was in my teen years that I made “the faith” “my faith”.

I felt the call to ministry in my late teens, but chose to follow another path into the business world. It didn’t take too long a struggle after college graduation to realize that to be happy I better answer the call. My later spiritual formation was grounded in a practical theology that continues to guide my ministry. I began full-time ministry in 1977. I was consecrated as a Diaconal Minister in 1979. I was ordained Deacon in Full Connection in the North Georgia Conference in 1997.

I believe God has used all of my experiences thus far to shape me into the servant God intends for me to become. I continue to be open to my Christian formation and grateful to God for God’s grace and calling in my life.

Walter Jones, Deacon
Executive Pastor, Snellville UMC