

Open to Call

Discerning God's voice is for everyone, not just for pastors.

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It was only after I became a minister that I realized I didn't need to become a minister.

Let me back up.

I came to faith in the Evangelical Covenant Church. My experiences in Sunday school, confirmation, Hi League, and the camping ministry taught me how to follow Jesus. I will always and forever be grateful for the churches, camps, and people that modeled God's love for me in those places.

Yet at times I sensed a subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—message in those years as well: The best way to live out your faith was to become a pastor. Or a missionary. Or a youth pastor. Those people had a “call.” Other people had, well, something else.

I truly did feel called to be a pastor and so I became one. My years ministering in churches were rich and rewarding. But for the past ten years my ministry has been more focused on laypeople. I have the good fortune of working on a daily basis with business leaders, teachers, doctors, parents, retirees, and lawyers in my role as director of Lumunos. Through this work I have learned three things:

- 1) Each of us is called by God.
- 2) “Call” is about our whole life.
- 3) Listening for call is a better way to live.

In the New Testament Paul uses the word *klesis* (from the Greek verb *kaleo*, “to call”) to refer to a life of faith. Call is about a relationship with God more than any specific work. Pastors are called to friendship with Jesus, but so are accountants and plumbers. We are all called by Jesus into relationship with him. Each of us is called by God, and that call encompasses the whole of our lives.

Certainly there are large, capital “C” call decisions, such as those that involve career or a major relationship. But call also is about our daily life. It has to do with the decisions we make

each day about how we spend our time. Pastor Ron Farr writes, “God’s call is the basic organizing principle of our lives. It wells up from our deepest priorities and inspirations, and determines how we manage our time, focus our energies, relate to others, organize our day, and make plans for the future.”

This fall I was asked to coach my son’s third grade soccer team. As I thought about the invitation, I talked to my wife, consulted my schedule, and, yes, prayed about it. In that process I was discerning a call. Such a decision would impact our family life and, to a lesser degree, my work. It would take time that I could have used in other ways. The world would not have stopped turning based on this decision—it was not a capital “C” call moment. But it was a small opportunity to serve the common good, and it would cost me something. I believe God cares about these decisions. Discerning call is the process of translating our beliefs and values into the daily schedule.

Like any spiritual practice, listening for God’s call as a regular discipline takes effort. Yet it is energy well spent. Why?

Help with the calendar. Everyone I know is busy. A few people are comfortably busy, the right kind of busy. But most of us (and I am definitely including myself in this group) are too busy. I feel stressed too often, and I need help figuring out how to be a good steward of what poet Mary Oliver famously calls “our one wild and precious life.”

These currents of busyness are strong. My calendar could easily fill to overflowing with invitations and obligations. Many of these invitations are important, even noble undertakings. But should I accept them all, even if my schedule permits it? Are they mine to do? Do they contribute in any small way to God’s reign, or are they “just”

good causes? In short, are they a part of my call?

Listening for God’s call helps us identify what is truly important to us. It helps us decide how we are going to spend the limited time we have in this wild and precious life.

Energy and quality. When we do what we do from a sense of call, we tend to have more energy for it. This makes sense because we are drawing from our values and passions. The work, whether it is paid or volunteer,

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has meaning for us, and meaning creates energy.

This is not to say that following a call means we do not get tired, exhausted, or discouraged. All these things can happen regardless of whether we are following a call or not. The difference is in the renewal. There is a source of strength we draw from when we are trying to listen to the Caller. A fruit tree creates fruit that eventually dies and falls from the tree, and eventually more fruit is created as nutrients are soaked in through the root system. In the imagery of the Old Testament, we become like a well-watered garden. “The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail” (Isaiah 58:11).

God’s vision for the world. Call is all about us—and it’s more than that. Call is about our gifts, experiences, passions, burdens, and dreams; but it is also about something bigger,

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greater, and more important than any one individual. Simply put, the world gets better the more people are listening to and following their call in all aspects of life. It can't help but get better because people are more energized by what they are doing, they can do it longer, and they do it better.

It also gets better because part of the definition of call is that it has to do with a greater good than we can imagine. The Caller invites us into action that is not just for our benefit, not just so we are happier and can do meaningful work longer, with greater integrity. The Caller invites us into action that will make the world more into what God envisions. The more we listen for and follow God's call, the more the world will begin to look the way God created it to look.

This is true not just in soup kitchens, churches, and other places we expect God to be. It is in classrooms and hospitals and business offices and homes. Where we are is the place we are in ministry. When a person is willing to do their work through the lens of their faith, accountable to a larger community, the world becomes a better place.

A way to see our lives whole. Call is about the whole of our lives. It brings the pieces together. As Eugene Peterson translates Psalm 19:7, "The *revelation* of GOD is *whole* and pulls our lives together." If you are wrestling with a decision about whether or not to take a certain job, you know that you must consider more than just the work itself. The decision is also about the financial and time implications; it's about how your acceptance of this job will impact others around you; it's about what it will mean for your health and other community commitments. In short, the decision must take into account the whole of your life. God does not ask us to separate out the pieces of our life. Listening for call means bringing them together.

In practical terms, this means that considerations like health insurance

or college payments are an important part of discerning call, not separate from it. It could mean passing up an opportunity to go on a mission trip because of the impact it could have on your health. It could mean saying no to an appealing volunteer opportunity because we recognize the toll it would place on the family. God invites us to "lay out the pieces of our life on the altar" (Psalm 5:3, *The Message*) and then listen. But how do we do that?

Former president of Faith at Work Marjory Bankson defines the process of discerning call as "discovering our particular field of action or the part of God's realm that is ours to tend at any given time." This is a helpful definition because it emphasizes the fluid nature of discerning call.

Call is not a one-time thing; it is the ongoing process of bringing the events of my life into conversation with God. Having children or aging parents matters; losing a job or a change in my health matters; what is going on in the world around me, both globally and locally, may affect my call. Author and retreat leader Paula D'Arcy says that "God comes to us disguised as our life." Listening for call is the process of listening deeply to my own life—and for God's voice in the midst of it. Each time we do that, we are at a kind of crossroads.

The prophet Jeremiah provides a helpful metaphor for discerning call when he writes, "Thus says the LORD: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls" (Jeremiah 6:16).

The crossroads we face may be significant, or they may be a small intersection. Either way, they invite a time of discernment, moments when we are asked to listen for God. There are many ways to discern God's call when you find yourself at a crossroads. Here are just a few ideas:

1) Pause. The first step may be both the simplest and hardest. Are we

willing to stand still at the crossroad? Can we take the time to pause, reflect, and pray, especially at those smaller crossroads, those weekly decisions? It is hard to listen when we are moving at a fast pace.

In one of the best-known call discernment stories of the Bible, Moses comes to a burning bush. But Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that he could have easily missed it. In *Altar in the World* she writes, "Wherever else he was supposed to be going and whatever else he was supposed to be doing, he decided it could wait a minute. He parked the sheep and left the narrow path in order to take a closer look at a marvelous sight." Discerning God's call means taking a closer look at the events and questions of our lives.

2) Connect the question. No crossroad question exists in a vacuum. As mentioned earlier, part of the work of discernment is to connect your discernment question with the whole of your life and the faith tradition. (Look to the ancient paths, says Jeremiah.) How does this issue connect with my gifts and experiences? If I go down this path, what will the impact be on others around me? How does this fit with my vision for the world? What will the financial implications be? Will it impact my physical or emotional health? How might Scripture or church teachings illumine the question?

This is not a simple equation, and it is more than a pro and con chart. It means bringing all these pieces of your life into your prayer—and then listening. Many years ago the Quaker Thomas R. Kelly wrote, "Facts remain facts, when brought into the Presence in the deeper level, but their value, their significance is wholly realigned. Much apparent wheat becomes utter chaff, and some chaff becomes wheat" (*A Testament of Devotion*). Connecting the question helps us to find what Thomas Merton called the "hidden wholeness" of our lives.

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3) *Pray the prayer of increase.*

Flora Slosson Wuellner uses a simple but profound prayer that she calls “the prayer of increase and decrease.” When she is facing a decision, she simply prays, “Lord, if this (whatever the potential call is) is of you, may it increase. If it isn’t, may it decrease in my life.” It takes time and a willingness to, as St. Ignatius said, “Listen to the echoes.” But if I am willing to pray and be in community around a decision, a yes will gradually take up more space in me, and God will diminish the no.

I have found this to be a helpful prayer in the most concrete and mundane circumstances, including those countless decisions around how to spend our money. Listening for call does not mean that God spits out answers to our prayers like a vending machine. But I have found that if I am willing to slow down, be in community, and listen carefully to my inner life, a “yes” or “no” will slowly emerge.

God help me if I have made any of this sound easy or simple. Some questions are simpler and the stakes are not that high. Other decisions are bigger, and sleep is lost. They are painful, even agonizing. And many, many times we are asked to do the best we can, moving forward even in our uncertainty, trusting in God’s grace.

As Oswald Chambers writes, “we are certain in our uncertainty... We are uncertain of the next step, but we are certain of God.”

One time as I struggled with a decision, my spiritual director asked me, “How or where do you most consistently experience God?” I listed some things that were reliable spiritual practices for me at that time in my life. She paused, and then with a twinkle in her eye, said, “If I were you, I’d do more of that.”

What sort of crossroads are you facing? How do you most reliably experience God? Do more of that. ■