


Encountering God in a call to ministry

Kathy McCamis

Traditional ecclesial wisdom has held that there are two parts that must be taken into account in discerning a call to pastoral leadership in the church: the inner call recognized by the individual being called, and the outer call of the church in recognition of that individual's gifts and suitability for ministry.

Yet for many women who discern a call to pastoral leadership in church settings where women in ministry leadership is still a subject of some uncertainty, these inner and outer elements of call frequently do not align neatly or easily. What happens then?

In my own experience, there was an eighteen-year gap between my first encounter with God that led me to explore whether I was being called to vocational ministry and the time when the outer call of the church finally came into alignment with my own encounters with the call of God. In the wilderness of those long in-between years, holding onto the memories



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of those sacred moments of encounter sustained me.


I was twenty-two years old and midway through my final year of a degree in occupational therapy, the career that I had set my sights on since my senior year of high school. Within six months, I would graduate and enter the workforce, start earning a paycheck, and live the life that I had been dreaming about.

However, ever since I had decided to follow Jesus in my first year of university, I had been dealing with niggling questions about whether the neat and clean

career path that I had envisioned for myself was consistent with what God wanted for my life and about how I might integrate my vocational life with my Christian faith.

With these questions in mind, I set out for InterVarsity's student missions conference Urbana 2000 that December—hoping to learn more about opportunities in the field of medical missions or how I might find other ways to integrate my faith and my vocation.

However, the flash of insight that I had been hoping for did not come. On the second-to-last day of the conference, I watched as thousands of other students around me stood to affirm their willingness to respond to God's call to serve in global missions. It seemed that, in spite of my



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hopes that God would descend and tell me how I could use my vocation to build the Kingdom of God, I was not one of the chosen.

On the final day of the conference, overwhelmed by all that I had been hearing and uncertain about how I might integrate any of it with my life once I returned home, I found myself sitting in the quiet of one of the conference's prayer rooms, asking God what I was to do next and wrestling with my lingering sense from the previous night that God might not want me after all.

Then, out of the blue and as clearly as if it had been spoken aloud (although I know it was not, if only because nobody else in the quiet room reacted in the least), I heard these words: "I need leaders in the church in North America too."

I had never before heard God speak to me so clearly and directly, and yet—although I journaled meticulously throughout the week of the conference about the people I met, speakers I heard, Scripture passages we studied, and even details of conversations with random strangers over breakfast—not a word about my experience that afternoon was recorded in my journal that day. It was simply too unlikely, too far outside of anything I had ever experienced or could begin to explain, too much like a week without enough sleep was making me think crazy thoughts.

After all, I had only been baptized about two years earlier. I was happily serving as an assistant to the preschool Sunday school teacher. Leadership in the church was the farthest thing from my mind.

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As the years went by, and as my inner sense of call to pastoral ministry continued to grow and gain clarity, I would add other moments of encounter with God to the touchstones that I would draw on each time another congregation told me that they were not prepared to consider hiring a woman on their pastoral team or each time another man dismissed my opinion with the words *because you're a woman*.

Sometimes, those encounters came in the form of an encounter with Scripture in which a passage seemed to jump off the page and take on new meaning. Other times, insight came seemingly from nowhere as I took a long, prayerful walk in the woods. Still other times, I recognized a still, small voice within me whispering words of comfort and reassurance in the face of yet another bitter disappointment.

Often, these encounters arrived unexpectedly, upsetting my comfortable status quo in one way or another. Almost always, I learned to recognize God's voice precisely because the thought or idea that presented

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itself was so far removed from my own reflections that I knew that it could not have come from within. Unfailingly, God's voice was more patient, more loving, more generous and compassionate than I was capable of being with myself. Over time, I got better at recognizing when an experience was one of encounter with God, and when I was simply

hearing my own inner voice. Exploring these moments of encounter with my spiritual director furthered my recognition of God's presence in my daily experience.

Now that I have the privilege of serving in full-time pastoral ministry in a congregation where my gifts are welcomed and affirmed and where I am free to serve as God has called me, I find that I look back wistfully on those years in the wilderness of the in-between, waiting for God's call to be fulfilled. As the outer call of the church has come into alignment with my own sense of God's call to me, I am learning to appreciate in new ways the voice of God that comes through the body of Christ, the church. These moments, too, are no less encounters with God.

And yet, I will always treasure those intimate moments of encountering God that sustained me in the in-between years, when it was God's voice and the experience of God's presence that led and restored, comforted and protected, named me as beloved and reassured me that I was

indeed wanted. These will continue to be sacred touchstones, places I return to in my memory, signs that point to a God who desires to know and be known. Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!

About the author

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