

Holding together inner and outer dimensions of call

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A common question seminary students hear is some variation of the call query. It starts out fairly indirectly: How did you come to be at seminary? Eventually it gets more direct: To what type of ministry are you sensing God calling you? And eventually even: Do you sense God's call to this particular place of ministry? During my years of teaching and pastoring seminary students, I've had the privilege of hearing hundreds of stories of God's call. I've witnessed students' sense of call emerging, shifting, solidifying, focusing. Each story is unique; all are holy.

The call of God is always something of a mystery. Each person experiences God's leading differently, so it is difficult to

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generalize about or even describe what a call to ministry is like. Personality may play a role in these differences. In addition, religious language varies from tradition to tradition, and it shapes how we experience our faith.

Call may be described as the leading of God—discerned through any number and kind of divine, human, or inner conversations—which directs our choices about use of our time, energy, and passion. The call to pastoral ministry has both an inner and an outer dimension. The inner call is a person's sense of God's invitation to pursue a ministry vocation. The outer call is the affirmation and validation of the community. Usually one

of these calls will develop before the other, but both are essential for the healthy functioning and identity of pastors. A key task of ministry preparation is the nurturing of the existing sense of call and the development of a holistic sense of call combining inner and outer aspects.

Inner call

An inner sense of call to ministry can happen in a variety of ways. Some people have “Damascus road” experiences in which they receive a clear, direct message or vision from God—an unmistakable sign. Others have “Emmaus road” experiences, in which there is an “aha” moment, followed by the question, “Did not our hearts burn within us on the road?” For still others, the inner call comes as a gentle nudging, a quiet whisper suggesting a direction. And there are some who have just always known, for as long as they could remember, that they would be pastors.

Those who experience an inner call first tend to be more intuitive folks—N’s on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The inner call is usually more sensed than overt, so those who perceive the world intuitively may be more likely to receive and pay attention to an inner call. Also, those who articulate a strong inner call tend to feel more comfortable with the idea that God is still speaking and acting in our world. They tend to have a well-developed sense of the Holy Spirit’s presence and empowerment in the church and in their own lives.

How is an inner call answered? Some people accept that call quickly and easily. It feels natural to them, or the sense of peace that floods them assures them that they can trust this calling. Some people resist the call, ignoring or fighting it. Others delay their response. They know that God is leading them toward this vocation, but they sense that the timing is not right. Still others carry their call tenderly for some time, trying to discern what it means for their future. In general, students entering seminary with a strong sense of inner call have already spent significant time and effort sorting through their questions and issues.

The story of Moses’s call may be helpful in understanding the common questions of those who have received an inner call. First, there is often the question, “Who am I, that I should go?” There may be a large gap between the person’s perception of what a pastor is like and how she sees herself. Just as Moses argued that he was not an eloquent speaker, many people receiving an inner call may feel that they are not adequate to the task.

Second, people who receive an inner call often have doubts about whether others will validate that call. In his ongoing struggle with God’s call, Moses responded, “But suppose they do

not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The LORD did not appear to you' ” (Exod. 4:1; NRSV). This comment expresses well the hesitancy of many who have received a strong inner sense of God's calling to ministry. Especially if that call included a supernatural experience of hearing God's voice or seeing a vision, people often wonder whether others will think they are arrogant or crazy.

One of the main issues the church must face as we work with people who have an inner sense of call to ministry is the question of how we know when such a call is authentic, and when it is misguided. This discernment is not always easy, and perhaps it is why Mennonites and other community-based traditions have felt

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more comfortable with and have given more weight to the outer call.

In fact, several of the earliest Anabaptist leaders stressed that a person could never appoint himself as a pastor but must be chosen by the church.¹ Until the middle of the twentieth century, Mennonite writings about the selection of pastors spoke only about the congregation's selection and discernment, not about a person's inner sense of God's calling.

Why are we sometimes uncomfortable with people who are certain that God has called them to pastoral ministry? We may fear attributing responsibility to God for human decisions and actions. We may worry that people will claim too much personal authority with too little accountability to the church. We may have experienced such people as being less open to guidance and critique, or less willing to listen to others. Or this kind of call experience may simply be foreign to our own experience, and we don't know how to validate it.

It is important that inner calls be tested and affirmed by the church. But what if the church doesn't do its job of discerning that outer call? Too many of our congregations don't take seriously our task of affirming gifts and calling out leaders. I once talked to a student who had a clear sense that he should be in seminary but was not at all sure why. He said no one in his congregation had

encouraged him to consider ministry, and then he quickly added, “But that’s not something our church does.”

An even greater tragedy is that many women who have sensed an inner call to pastoral ministry not only have received no encouragement but have even faced barriers to their calling. Those barriers may be subtle (not ever seeing women in ministry roles) or overt (constitutions limiting the roles of women, or refusal to ordain). But the most common and debilitating barriers women face are the discouragement of family members, biblical arguments against their leadership, and nonrecognition of their gifts in the church. Thankfully, these obstacles are less common than in previous generations, but the church cannot ignore the painful reality that resistance still exists in too many places.

How can churches and individuals nurture these inner calls while developing an accompanying sense of outer call? The story of Samuel’s call (1 Sam. 3) illustrates four stages: clarifying, initial validating, preparing, and testing of the wider community.

Sometimes an inner call must be *clarified* before it can be tested. Many people’s sense of call begins vaguely and needs guidance or time to become more specific. Samuel heard God’s voice calling his name but believed it was Eli calling him. Finally Eli realized what was happening and told Samuel that he was being called by God. Samuel was hearing something but was not sure of the source. Similarly, many people first hearing an inner call to ministry need help to identify what it is. Spiritual direction can be a helpful tool in clarifying the call.

Second, the inner call needs some sort of *initial validation*. This validation might be through testing it with one or two other people, or it might come as a sign from God. After Samuel received God’s message, Eli insisted on hearing it, and when Samuel reluctantly gave him the message about the coming punishment against Eli’s house, Eli validated the message by saying, “It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him” (1 Sam. 3:18).

Pastors and family members are the most likely folks with whom people will initially test their sense of call to ministry. The response of these initial discernment communities is critical for many people.

Preparation is a stage embracing a variety of elements. It can include mentoring, spiritual guidance, academic training, and

experiential training. These aspects of discernment and doing ministry tasks are critical both for developing a sense of call and for readying people for the testing of the church. The story of Samuel doesn't elaborate on this stage, but we know from the context that Samuel continued to receive training and guidance from Eli to prepare him for his role as prophet.

Finally, the outer call comes with the *testing of the wider community*. Verse 20 of 1 Samuel 3 says "And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD." As a person's gifts and personality are tested and affirmed in the church, the outer call can be added to the inner call.

Outer call

Those who begin their journey toward pastoral ministry with an outer call usually have obvious gifts of leadership, scholarship, or care-giving, and these gifts lead others to encourage them to consider pastoral ministry and/or seminary studies. The shoulder-tapping may be done by teachers, college professors, pastors, congregation members, small groups, family members, colleagues, or friends.

The people who begin their journey to ministry with an outer call are diverse, but they tend to have an external locus of authority, at least at this stage of their life, and the response of others is important to them. In the past, they would have been mostly male, but now the gifts of women are also being encouraged in

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many places. The ones who end up at seminary tend to be loyal to community, particularly the church, and take seriously the fact that someone has encouraged them to consider ministry or seminary studies. They also tend to be younger, perhaps because our college faculty have done better than many congregations in calling out gifts.

Like those who begin with an inner call, some who first receive an outer call accept that calling readily, while others resist it or delay acting on it. But the journey to join an inner call to their external call is still in front of them, and that journey can't be controlled or forced. Therefore these people tend to bring more

unanswered questions about their call with them to seminary. They usually struggle more with the idea of being a pastor than with doing the tasks a pastor does. They may also find it hard to claim their own authority, especially if they are young adults.

Just as people with an inner call need the affirmation of the church in order for their call to be complete, people who have been outwardly affirmed need to develop a sense of inner call. If this fails to happen, they won't have the spiritual and emotional resources to survive rough times in ministry, particularly when they meet critique or opposition. Mary's call (the Annunciation) illustrates four stages of developing an inner call: clarifying, preparing and exploring, continued validating, and claiming.

Many people, when first told they should consider ministry, respond with shock. Often the idea is not one they have considered, and it may not fit their self-perception. Like Mary, they may be perplexed by the affirmation and wonder what it means (Luke 1:29). And often their initial response will be like Mary's: "How can this be?" (Luke 1:34). The reason for perplexity may be anything: "I am too young," "I don't know the Bible well enough," etc. Their questions and protests are part of *clarifying* the initial call they have received.

Preparing is just as important for people who begin with an outer call as for those who begin with an inner call. But in this case, a primary benefit of preparation is *exploring* various options for the future, which can help people develop a sense of where the need of the world and the church matches their deepest longings and joys. Often the inner call develops in the process of testing gifts. Doing leads to being. Acting as if one is a pastor may lead to realizing that one is in fact a pastor. Along the way, people need the assurance Mary received, that nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37).

For people who are struggling to sense an inner call, it can be frustrating to hear the call stories of others, especially those whose inner call is extremely clear and those from a tradition that stresses the importance of a clear word from God. Such stories are especially hard for people who operate more rationally and find the inner, intuitive world more foreign.

Often the journey to claim an inner call takes time. This journey can't be controlled or forced. But offering companionship

along the way, whether in spiritual direction or mentoring, can create a climate in which the inner call can develop. When we invite people to consider ministry, we need to commit ourselves to walking with them, listening to them as they explore their doubts and longings.

Another critical part of the journey is **continued validating**, or ongoing affirmation of their gifts. Mary received an unmistakable external affirmation of her calling from her cousin Elizabeth. At Mary's greeting, Elizabeth exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Luke 1:42–45).

It was at this point—after Elizabeth confirmed what the angel had said, and when she had blessed rather than judged Mary—that Mary was able to express her praise of God in the Magnificat. In this song Mary was finally able to **claim the call of God internally**. That is the goal for those who begin with an outer call—to be able to claim the joyful assurance that "the Mighty One has done great things for me" (1:49).

At various points in ministry, pastors may have a stronger sense of inner or outer call. During times with less affirmation, the inner call may sustain them. During times of self-doubt, the outer call may sustain them. But for the ongoing health of pastors and their ministry, both need to be held together.

Note

¹Hans Hotz, "Bern Colloquy" (1538); and Peter Riedeman, *Account of Our Religion, Doctrine and Faith* (1542); quoted in Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1981), 125–26, 129.

About the author

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