

Tell me about your call

Sara Wenger Shenk

Tell me about your call,” the veteran missionary said to my husband and me during a week of orientation, his eyes shining with eager anticipation. Gerald and I had just completed two years of seminary and were heading off at twenty-four years of age for an atypical mission assignment in Yugoslavia. At the height of the cold war in 1977, leaders at Eastern Mennonite Missions and Mennonite Central Committee were beginning to send Mennonite young adults to various eastern European countries as university students with a mandate to study, connect with local churches, teach if invited, and build bridges with our communist “enemies.”

While I was ready for the adventure of this unusual assignment, I was floored by the missionary’s question. As a missionary kid, I

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knew the language of call. I was a baptized disciple of Jesus Christ, drawn to reflect deeply on God’s work in the world and to give myself to the purposes of the kingdom of God. But I had grown uneasy with the piety associated with the language of call. It seemed to give people license to see their own enterprises as God’s work.

And I harbored an undercurrent of skepticism. During my college years I had imbibed the critique of colonialism and its influence on the missionary enterprise, and I didn’t want to be lumped in with overly zealous

people who disrespect indigenous peoples and their traditional wisdom and rich culture. That description didn’t characterize the work of my parents or most of their colleagues, but it was the prevailing caricature of the mission enterprise.

The truth is that I didn’t really know what I was called to be or do. My husband thrived in Yugoslavia. He excelled at language

learning; made friends easily; readily took risks to teach, preach, enter war zones, and forge friendships with Marxists and Muslims—among many others. I, on the other hand, was intensely private and reserved; I preferred to stay behind the scenes. While intellectually I had welcomed the biblical feminist invitation to become all that God intends me to be, I wasn't sure what that meant for me, and I needed time to ponder. In that pondering, I began slowly to find my voice as a theologically attuned, spiritually grounded writer.

Several years later, as a young mother and published author, I was surprised by an invitation to teach at Eastern Mennonite Seminary (Harrisonburg, Virginia). During chapel one day, we were invited to share about our own call to ministry. I was paired with a faculty colleague. After fumbling around the question, I stumbled into a profound awareness that what I have felt called to is *integrity*, an honest way of being present in the moment, in spirit and truth. My call, as I was able to identify it, had more to do with a way of *being* in the world than with any specific work.

The question of my call took on new urgency when the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) presidential search committee contacted me as one of three people they'd identified in the final stage of their discernment. I was caught off guard—honored that they'd consider me but sure they'd been misled. I agreed to call back in a week with word about whether I was willing to engage the process. After most of the week had passed, I still had no idea how to respond. I knew there was no way I would accept the job if I were invited, but I also knew they'd spent months in discernment, so I didn't want to say no lightly. I take the call of the church seriously.

I sought out a former college president, a woman who shared her own story of surprising call. My husband and I engaged in many an argument about whether I could simply say no, which I was sure I needed to do. Other close friends counseled me to give the process of discernment time to unfold. I agreed with reservation to take the next step at each point in the process. Days before the interview with the search committee, I called to say that if I were invited to the job, I was unlikely to accept. The only way I could proceed with integrity was to let them know. After conferring, the committee decided they wanted to move ahead as planned.

Meanwhile, I was deeply disquieted. For days I lived with strange dreams, before they began to open themselves to me. Biblical stories of call drew me in with new urgency. I often awoke at 4:30 or earlier and could hardly wait to light a candle and sink into prayer, holding on for dear life because the ground was shifting beneath me. Morning after morning, the choral music of the Russian Orthodox Church held me in its deep harmonies when I had no words.

The mystery of call pulled me into the cavernous unknown. I've never felt so inexorably led, step by step, in a direction I resisted with every fiber of my being. Walter Brueggemann's book of prayers, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*, became a rod and staff for me. Here is an excerpt that broke me wide open:

*We arrange our lives as best we can,
to keep your holiness at bay . . .
Safe, virtuous, settled.
And then you—
you and your dreams,
you and your visions,
you and your purposes,
you and your commands . . .
We find your holiness not at bay,
but probing, pervading,
insisting, demanding.
And we yield, sometimes gladly,
sometimes resentfully,
sometimes late . . . or soon.
We yield because you, beyond us, are our God.
We are your creatures met by your holiness,
by your holiness made our true selves.
And we yield. Amen.¹*

I don't easily yield. I resist doing anything out of a sense of duty or obligation. I'm schooled in self-preservation. But this time it was different. I don't know if it's the weathering that comes with age, or if it's surviving wrenching personal experiences, or learning to trust despite the vulnerability of any given moment—whatever it is, I have over time developed more solid footing in the love of

God. More and more often I remember that calling isn't about me. And it isn't about you either. Yet of course it is, because God created and calls us each by name. But what we're about is really the mission of God in the world. That's what fills me with gratitude—and courage. It's about Jesus. It's about the great God of the heavens who comes near to us with tender love, forgiveness, and justice for all. That is what we're each called to testify to through whatever it is we are and do day in and day out—with integrity—in spirit and in truth.

I have no illusions about the challenge of the job I've undertaken. I normally prefer to avoid risk, and to count on someone else to shoulder major responsibilities. We put much at risk in this move. Yet I've been surprised by joy—and this wonderful community. AMBS isn't perfect, by any means, but I've sensed in a deeply reassuring way the legacy of faithful devotion to God's mission that undergirds this place. I've quickly felt at home in profound ways that I hadn't known were possible.

I accepted the call to leadership as a sacred trust—joining a team of extraordinarily gifted, spiritually grounded, and delightful people who find great fulfillment in preparing leaders for God's reconciling mission in the world. Indeed, yielding to the call, when it comes from the community of faith and rings true within one's own spirit, is a blessing.

I'm reminded of the scene from the Gospel of Luke when “a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to Jesus, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!’ But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!’ ” (Luke 11:27). There is nowhere I would rather be than fully yielded to God's call day in and day out—and becoming more fully my true self, for the glory of God.

Note

¹Edwin Searcy, ed., *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). Reproduced by permission of Augsburg Fortress Publishers.

About the author

Sara Wenger Shenk is president of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana), and loving it—the work, the community, the opportunity to be about God's reconciling mission in the world.