

Speak, Lord, for your servants are still listening

Calling and vocation in the last third of life

Muriel Bechtel

It began as a leisurely Sunday lunch with church friends at a local restaurant. When I mentioned that I was writing an article on calling and vocation in retirement, suddenly the conversation went to another level. It was evident that the topic had captured the group's interest, as each person in turn responded to these questions: What was your calling in life? What happened to that calling as you reached retirement, whether by choice or through other circumstances? As a soon-to-be-retired area church minister, my interest was more than academic. It was intensely personal.

Roy had been a principal. After retiring at fifty-five he accepted two consecutive executive roles in nonprofit community organizations. He said, "When I retired from school administration, I prayed for a place to use my administrative skills to make a contribution to the community." Though no longer in active leadership roles, he continues to be interested in the work of the wider church.

How might the church provide opportunities for Christians in late adulthood to give and receive counsel about how their Christian calling relates to their personal calling for this season of life?

Marg, who cleans apartments for seniors in a retirement residence, said, "I'm a worker. I need to be active. I couldn't visit someone just to talk. But I love talking with people and listening to their stories while I'm cleaning their apartments." Marg also readily

identified the calling of her husband, whose retirement was forced when his career in sales was cut short by a stroke: "Doug has been lobbying for stroke victims for better rehabilitation services in the local hospital. Without his persistence and determination, I'm convinced it would not be happening."

Gladys, retired from working in food processing or manufacturing plants most of her life, reflected on how the recent death of her husband has changed her life: "When you lose a spouse, you

lose a big part of your identity. It takes a long time to figure out who you are and where you belong.” Her calling for now is to develop a new identity and a new community.

I asked my questions of several retired pastors. Since her retirement, Martha assists with credentialing interviews for licensing and ordaining pastors; she also serves as a mentor to younger women pastors. She told me: “My calling really hasn’t changed since I retired. It’s to be a faithful disciple and to offer my gifts, but now I do that depending on the situation and on my time and energy.”

Paul, a retired pastor who is facing limitations related to failing health, observed: “My calling is to be a servant, like it’s been all my life. But it means something different now. At this stage in my life, being a servant means letting go, passing on the responsibility, and being willing to receive from others. After a lifetime of doing for others, I have to learn to let others do for me. It’s not easy.” He is writing about his life experiences. “I find meaning in reflecting back over my life, the experiences I’ve had and the people I have shared them with. I hope others, especially my children and grandchildren, will find these reflections meaningful too.”

As these conversations suggest, having a sense of call or vocation in life continues to give purpose and meaning to life after retirement. That calling will be expressed in new ways appropriate to the person’s stage in life, but it does not end.

Asking the right questions

Henry Simmons has suggested that at each stage of life, as available time, energy, and abilities change, we have to answer three questions: Who am I? What will I do? With whom will I do it? Each new stage calls for the “creative and responsible reordering and living out of one’s life” by addressing these three key issues: identity, generativity, and intimacy.¹

Others have suggested a fourth question: What will give meaning or purpose to my life? Calling and vocation are words that speak to the meaning question. They hark back to our baptism, when we were affirmed as God’s beloved sons and daughters. At baptism, Christians publicly commit ourselves to being participants in the saving work of God through living and loving as Jesus did. When we promise to “give and receive counsel in the

congregation” and to “participate in the mission of the church,”² we don’t add a qualifier that specifies “until retirement.”

North American society bombards retirees with messages convincing them that the primary purpose of the years after retirement is to relax and enjoy the fruits of their working years.

Older people who spend all their time in leisure activities and without a sense of purpose are more susceptible to declining physical and mental health, as evidenced in symptoms such as weight gain, boredom, self-absorption, and depression.

Such messages render invisible those for whom economics, health, or family circumstances make relaxing an impossible dream. Furthermore, research shows that even with better health care and greater longevity, older people who spend all their time in leisure activities and without a sense of purpose are more susceptible to declining physical and mental health, as evidenced in symptoms such as weight gain, boredom, self-absorption, and depression.³

Nor are clergy, mission and church workers, or people with a “religious” vocation the only ones who are called. The early

Anabaptists agreed with Martin Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, which asserts that “all baptized Christians are . . . called to participate in the saving work of God” and that all stations in life are divine vocations.⁴

Biblical understandings of calling or vocation

The first mention of call in the biblical text is God’s call to Abram: “Go from your country and your kindred . . . to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2; NRSV). God’s call included a promise and a purpose: in following his call, Abram would be blessed *in order that* he would be a blessing to others.

A less familiar biblical account of call is described by Jeremiah, who heard this word from the Lord: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you: I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:4–5). This passage depicts calling as a unique way of being that is given by God when one is still in the womb. The implication is that such a calling animates one’s doing from birth throughout life.⁵ Long

before his baptism, Jesus seems to have had a growing awareness of his vocation when at the age of twelve he told his worried parents that he must be in his Father's house (Luke 2:49).

Both understandings of call or vocation begin with God, but the first is about doing and the second is about being. Our being is not limited by our ability to do. Our core identity informs our calling and remains part of us no matter what our station or stage in life. The invitation at each stage in life is to discern how our unique calling will be expressed in this particular time and place and in light of our larger Christian identity as God's people who are called to be part of Christ's ministry on earth. Each transition offers us new opportunities to grow deeper in God's love and to bless others in ways we had not imagined or thought possible.

The church's calling

In North American culture, aging is often depicted as a process of growing incompetence and declining significance. In a changing demographic, in which the proportion of active seniors in the general population will increase dramatically in the coming decades, the Christian church has a unique opportunity to invite older people to reimagine their calling and vocation.⁶

To do so will require converting the imaginations of old and young. Rather than letting our culture define aging, older adults in the church have a missional opportunity to redefine what it means for each person to be fully human until life ends. "Older people who refuse to be seduced by [the culture's] value system have the potential to be an unprecedented prophetic force in the world."⁷ What they need from the church is what all Christians need from the community—to be reminded that they are still loved and still called to be a blessing, in this season of life as in all those that preceded.

In *Called for Life: Finding Meaning in Retirement*, Paul Clayton poses questions that relate specifically to vocation or calling: What are my skills and abilities? Where and how am I being called to use them?⁸ When people are in young or middle adulthood, the church often asks questions related to calling or vocation. Does the church also invite people who are entering retirement to reflect on questions related to calling? How might the church provide opportunities for Christians in late adulthood

to give and receive counsel about how their Christian calling relates to their personal calling for this season of life?⁹

Aging well involves “achieving a sense of integrity and wisdom.”¹⁰ Asking older people about their calling invites them to a deepening integrity: to find ways to be true to their God-given identity and their baptismal commitment as they enter later adulthood, a stage that could constitute as much as a third of their life. Asking about calling at this stage of life recognizes the wisdom God has given older people through their life experiences, and it invites them to continue to be a blessing to others.

The golden years—a golden opportunity

The twenty-first-century church is faced with the missional challenge of inspiring the imaginations of older adults, some of whom are disillusioned with the self-absorption of society and ripe for new dreams. The church in its worship, life, and mission can create opportunities for asking questions of vocation and inviting older people to share their wisdom. Older people who are still eager to say yes to God’s call are found in the Bible, and in our families and communities.

When Naomi’s husband and two sons died in Moab, she found new purpose in being a mentor for Ruth, her son’s widow. At Obed’s birth, the women who were Naomi’s community reminded

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her that God’s surprise of a grandson through her foreign-born daughter-in-law would bring meaning and purpose to her old age: “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin . . . [This child] shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him” (Ruth 4:14–15).

Pastors and leaders who have served with passion and persistence and find it hard to let go will find wisdom in Moses’s encounter with God after leading Israel out of Egypt and

through the wilderness. When they finally arrived at Mount Pisgah, though Moses was tired in spirit and body, the sight of the Promised Land in the distance reignited his passion for leading the

people across the Jordan to their destination. But God had hard words for Moses: “Look well, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. But charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, because it is he who shall cross over at the head of this people and who shall secure their possession of the land that you will see”

The church’s calling is to be as intentional at the end of life as at the beginning—reminding God’s people of their calling to be a blessing as circumstances and abilities allow, and assuring them that they are beloved.

(Deut. 3:27–28). God reminded Moses that the journey to which he had dedicated his life was not just about him. There was still work to be done, and Moses’s new calling was to step back and to charge, encourage, and strengthen his successor.¹¹

Those who are scarcely able to do but who are seasoned in recognizing God’s voice may well learn from the elderly priest Eli, who, though his eyesight was growing dim, taught young Samuel to recognize and respond to God’s voice (1 Sam. 3). They may learn from Simeon and Anna, who waited patiently at

the temple in Jerusalem to see the fulfillment of God’s promise and to tell others what they had seen (Luke 2:25–38).

At a certain point, some of us will need others to care for us. Jesus’ words to Peter name that reality: “When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go” (John 21:18).

Even in dying each of us is invited to be the person God has called us to be. As an intensive care nurse, Jean had given years of her life to nursing others through their dying. A few months after retirement, she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given three to six months to live. Rather than spend her last weeks in bitterness and anger, she saw it as her calling to die well, forgiving past hurts and telling people what they meant to her. Jean was a blessing to all who witnessed her let go of *doing* God’s work and focus on *being* God’s person in the world¹² in her dying.

The church welcomes people at the beginning of life and patiently forms them to be disciples of Jesus Christ. At baptism, they become members of a community with others who promise to give and receive counsel as they discern what it means to do

God's work and be God's people in the world. The church's calling is to be as intentional at the end of life as at the beginning—reminding God's people through our worship, communal life, and mission of their calling to be a blessing as circumstances and abilities allow, and assuring them that they are beloved even as they take their last breath and depart this life to enter the next.

Notes

¹ Henry C. Simmons, "A Framework for Ministry for the Last Third of Life," in *Aging, Spirituality and Religion*, ed. Melvin Kimble and Susan H. McFadden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 87.

² Taken from the baptismal vows in *Minister's Manual*, edited by John D. Rempel (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1998), 48.

³ Harold G. Koenig, MD, in *Purpose and Power in Retirement: New Opportunities for Meaning and Significance* (Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2002), provides a historical overview of how societal expectations for retirement have changed: our current perceptions about retirement and old age are relatively recent developments.

⁴ Keith Graber Miller, "Transforming Vocation: A Mennonite Perspective," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 83 (January 2009): 30–31.

⁵ Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn, *Healing the Purpose of Your Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 2.

⁶ Simmons, "A Framework for Ministry for the Last Third of Life," 92–93.

⁷ Kathleen Fischer, *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 15.

⁸ Paul C. Clayton, *Called for Life: Finding Meaning in Retirement* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008).

⁹ Virgil Vogt stresses that every Christian accepts her/his Christian calling at baptism, in *The Christian Calling*, Focal Pamphlet no. 6 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1961).

¹⁰ Carroll Saussy, *The Art of Growing Old: A Guide to Faithful Aging* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 31.

¹¹ Clayton, *Called for Life*, 83.

¹² *Ibid.*, 88.

About the author

Muriel Bechtel is area church minister for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. Her interest in discerning call was the focus of a recent sabbatical at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana), and it continues to shape her approach to her ministry with pastors. Muriel is married to David; together they look forward to the callings still to come in their retirement.