

Ministry in spite of

Telling and owning all of our calling story

Bryce Miller

Ministry arises from a sense of call: a hard-to-express but impossible-to-ignore sense of the working of the Spirit bringing forth ministry for the individual. Finding and owning the story of that sense of call is often an important part of the formation of a person toward ministry. The story sometimes becomes well worn: the sense of initial openness; shoulder tappers along the way that gave permission, if not a mandate, to pursue the call; the process of accepting and identifying the call within us and through us. This forming story proves critical as it confirms and convicts us of who we are as ministers. When we find ourselves in need of reassurance, we often turn to this sense of calling to anchor us to that which invited us into ministry in the first place.

Often these stories remain just that: accounts of how we got where we are. We are less good at telling the story that keeps developing along the way as the Spirit continues to lead. Moreover, we tend to be selective in how we tell our stories. Just like we know a good salvation story involves the lost person eventually being found (something of which I have been envious as a lifelong churchgoer), we know that a story of call “goes down better” when it concentrates on the positive attractions of and affirmations toward ministry. The challenges to the call, the hesitations, the doubts (be they self-induced or external), the things that we carry with us and minister in spite of—these things generally don’t get talked about, or at least not publicly. In this way, we rob ourselves and those with whom we minister of a broader sense of what it means to be called and how to live our calls out on a day-to-day basis. Witnessing to a dynamic sense of call brings a more honest, Spirit-led, and spiritually insightful form of ministry to the body, especially when it comes to ministry across a range of abilities.

Pastoral ministry in spite of

I term this other half of our call story *ministry in spite of* largely because that is often how it is presented and understood. As a minister who happens

to have lived a life defined by physical limitations, that is often how it is described to me: that which I was called to do in spite of what is seen as the obvious impediment to my ministry. For me this means having physical

My physicality presents itself as something well outside the norm of what we expect our pastors to be.

challenges that our two young children have taken to calling “Daddy’s wiggly arms” and a voice that doesn’t always articulate as clearly as I would like. This is part of my *ministry in spite of*, alongside much else. Given that this is what sticks out about me as a ministering person, it is often what people are surprised by,

for good and for ill. My physicality, a manifestation of my diagnosis of Cerebral Palsy on the lower-impact end of the spectrum of affectation, presents itself as something well outside the norm of what we expect our pastors to be: traditionally capable, articulate, and a manifestation of the mainstream normalcy that we accept.


Most of the time this *in spite of* is meant as a term of admiration and inspiration, and as an expression of gratitude for ministry that is unique beyond the expectations that we carry. Other times people struggle to accept ministry from someone who is not a typically formed physical vessel, reflecting their theology of what it means to be less than perfect and their expectation that ministry can only happen through those who reflect the normalcy that they themselves expect of God. Many times, I have been asked the question asked of Jesus in John 9—Who sinned that this person is what they are?²—expecting an explanation to account for what they are seeing.¹ It sounds a lot more awkward when phrased in the second person, especially when you happen to be the *you* they are questioning. Mostly, this is a good moment for a quip to gently puncture their expectations the best I can.

But here’s the thing: I don’t think I am extraordinary by virtue of my conditions or for any other reason at all. My circumstance merely lays bare what is universally true: ministry happens *in spite of* no matter the person to whom we are referring. Everything we come to know and understand about God happens in spite of our human disinclination toward being oriented to the working of the divine. Every call comes to be accepted and

1 John 9:1–2; seldom do those who pose these queries seem to have read the entirety of John 9 to hear what all Jesus has to say of what is going on here.

lived in spite of the circumstances that mitigate against it, whether or not those reasons are clearly articulated.

There is a fundamental narcissism to the task of getting up with regularity and proposing that you have something to say about God that might prove insightful, let alone useful, in guiding others toward the gospel of the Kingdom. We forget this at our peril. When we perpetuate the mythos



When we perpetuate the mythos of ministry as the task of the heroically convicted and called, we build barriers for those whose personal sense of call might not seem to measure up to those standards.

of ministry as the task of the heroically convicted and called, we build barriers for those whose personal sense of call might not seem to measure up to those standards. We trap ourselves into the expectations these assumptions carry and pass those same expectations on to those to whom we minister. The widely reported loneliness, mental health struggles, and other difficulties found in those who minister is due in no small part to the cultural and personal

expectation that ministry is a task only for the fit and the sound. When we cannot minister with an honest articulation of our *in spite of*, we find ourselves alone and isolated for want of expression, being fairly sure that we don't measure up or, more damaging still, holding as secret that which we expect to be our disqualification for the task to which we are given. If we were able to expand our calling to include that which stands in its way, we would be able to minister from a place of more genuine humanity and honesty than we could before.

Congregational ministry in spite of

Ministry happens *in spite of* not only for the minister but also for the congregation. The context in which my wife Emily Toews and I co-pastor is rural Eastern Washington State, a land of endless views and similarly unstoppable wheat fields. Menno Mennonite Church is a congregation of farmers who work this land as have the generations before them. Hearing loss is the routine price of farming, a natural consequence of years working with machinery. It is what is normal in this context. But it is also a challenge to adapt to when one's vocal patterns are not always easy to hear. I offer several accommodations: I publish my sermon manuscript both electronically and in hard copy for people to follow along with (albe-

it with the basic disclaimer that I reserve the right to depart from it), and I use a particularly suitable microphone, among other accommodations.


Following the pandemic, we have continued to livestream our worship via YouTube for those at a distance to enjoy, which is especially important given that some routinely drive ninety miles one way to get to church. Given our geography, it makes sense to continue streaming as a basic accommodation. But this practice has also revealed some surprises along the way. Several times now I have received comments from people who have chosen to watch the livestream of worship outside their usual pattern of attending church in person. Having done so, they tell me that they can understand me far better watching online. It has been a bit of a revelation for some, opening the door for a conversation about their own challenges with hearing and listening. In one case, it even yielded the opportunity to design a solution that offers sound directly from the audio board to an individual's hearing aid using the same device they use to watch TV at home. This removes the social barrier of going and requesting bulky hearing equipment from the sound booth. It also opens up the mutuality of ministry as we encounter the *in spite of* inherent in each of our circumstances.

Relying on the Spirit in ministry

By being explicit about how ministry happens in spite of the circumstances that we each carry, we normalize the fact that we do not always show up to church ready to be inspired, no matter how well the sermon is preached or the music is performed. In speaking of ministry *in spite of*, we normalize the experience of not getting a whole lot out of church for a while, as well as commending the best remedy: to just keep coming, all the while being gentle with yourself and with those who are trying to communicate to you, as you both wait for the Spirit to do its work in overcoming the barriers between you. When we can name that this all happens in spite of our “stuff” and acknowledge that it is the Spirit that makes any of this possible, we build a way of working with and beyond the model of capacity and performance and trust the working of the Spirit that welds our effort and God's presence together.

To be clear, this is not about accepting a less than rigorous approach to the work of getting ready for ministry and doing our best. Far from it. The practice of ministering, whether it is public ministry or personal counseling, is just that—a practice that demands a committed, reflective, and improvement-oriented approach at all levels and times. But it also

must be couched within the spiritual context in which it exists. Sometimes the sermons on which we have worked the hardest are the ones that fall the most profoundly flat. Other times, when we are the least confident in



Acknowledging that ministry happens in spite of what we do places the working of the Holy Spirit at the core of all ministry.

what we have to say, we solicit the strongest connections. Acknowledging that ministry happens in spite of what we do places the working of the Holy Spirit at the core of all ministry and reminds us of the miraculous nature of it all. We prepare, study, practice, adjust, and grow. But we need not despair entirely when, despite all that we do, things fall

flat, nor chastise ourselves unnecessarily for the consequences. We seek the Spirit that works alongside us and in spite of us, allowing our best efforts to see fruit in God's grace. In this way, ministry ends up looking a whole lot more like baseball, where an exceptional batting average is .300 (30 percent), than it does a theatrical performance where it comes down to being faithful to the script.

Acknowledging ministry in spite of who we are and what we face allows us to better access the changing nature of call. We have our call that starts us on the journey of ministry. But that does not mean the Spirit ceases conversation at that point. Recognizing the things that complicate our yes to ministry acknowledges that our yes is conditional, and our conditions change. The conditions change for us internally as we grow and mature, allowing the experiences of our lives to shape us as they will and as they must. They change externally as the circumstances of our lives shift around us as well. Emily and I have found ourselves drawn to relatively far-flung places as our ministry contexts, drawn to the people we find there. But as we age and our children grow, we are increasingly conscious of our need for rootedness, and we wonder how that will impact the direction of our ministry. There are other external factors that are not personal. It does not take a huge leap of imagination to envision a time where the gifts and challenges that we bring to our particular place may no longer be compatible with the needs of the community we serve. I especially consider how my speech may stretch the needs of an aging community too far, and I wonder whether my ability to minister *in spite of* may be too demanding for a congregation's particular needs and requirements. Holding this, uncomfortably at times, as a fundamental part of the nature of ministry helps us better release the notion that a particular difficulty in ministry is

evidence of a failure of desire, adaptation, or goodwill. Instead, we can see it as part of the long and organic process of calling. We serve where the Spirit is willing. The fleshy nature of our call can push and pull us, but that does not mean that the call is somehow invalidated along the way. Ministry together between a leader and congregation is a working and will of Spirit, and we would do well to trust that work within us.

Conclusion

The late singer-songwriter (and, I would add, psalmist) Leonard Cohen is known for how he captures the spiritual life. An avowed seeker, he wrote often on themes of spirituality. Over the years, a song of his has become of psalm of mine. “If It Be Your Will” contemplates what it means to be allowed to be part of what the Spirit is up to. Written at a time of crisis for Cohen as he faced the prospect of a career-ending throat disorder, he wrote this song as a prayer of release to the will of the giver of the gift in the first place. While Cohen contemplates what it might mean to be allowed to continue to speak in order to raise the praises that he owes, the song is ultimately a psalm of submission to the empowering will to continue or to release.²

We are called to ministry, sharing in the great mystery by pointing to what God is up to in this broken, beloved world. We must acknowledge that we are called not because we are studied, accomplished, capable, or otherwise gifted. We may well be all that and more. But that is not why we are called. Calling is a function not of ability or disability but of the gifting of God’s invitational love. We are called because it is the will of the Spirit and the one who guides that Spirit toward God’s will. In this we can all listen, hear, follow, and stand amazed.

About the author

Bryce Miller is a co-pastor of Menno Mennonite Church in Ritzville, Washington. He lives and pastors alongside Emily Toews, their children Luke and Anna (self-described junior pastors), a brood of great horned owls, and uncounted coyotes. He has previously served in Tucson, Arizona, and Winnipeg, Manitoba. A life-long geek, he is drawn to technology, puzzles, and a good story in many forms.

2 This song is worth hearing, especially as introduced by Cohen himself in a live performance in London with the Webb Sisters; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_Xc-MAGZjuY/.