

How Many Congregations Does It Take To Raise a Minister?

Calling and Sending

Whom shall we send, and who will go for us?

Sarah was too old to conceive children, but with God nothing is impossible.

God equips those who are called.

When Moses protested that he could not speak well, God gave him Aaron as his mouthpiece.

God equips those who are called.

In an age where men ruled, God chose Deborah to lead Israel with vision and savvy.

God equips those who are called.

Isaiah felt deeply his people's shame and unworthiness until a seraph cleansed his lips with a flaming coal.

God equips those who are called.

Amos was a shepherd and tree surgeon, yet God called him to prophesy to the seats of power, "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

God equips those who are called.

Jeremiah, while only a youth, was charged to forth-tell the devastation of Israel, as well as to preach hope for new life.

God equips those who are called.

Jesus' disciples were small business folk, government workers, and women. Through these people, God transformed the Roman world.

God equips those who are called.

Today, Christ calls disciples from all walks of life to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. The church is called to equip disciples and to send them into the world to work with God. With Isaiah, we hear the question: "Whom shall we send, and who will go for us?"

Here we are. Send us.

—GPV

All Christians are called to ministry through baptism. Some Christians—through demonstrating gifts, grace, and the church's confirmation—are also called to the ministry of the ordained. My concern here regards our church culture in which the candidates for ordination are called to their ministry.¹

To invoke the "it takes a village" phrase regarding the ministry of the ordained: *it takes the whole church to raise its clergy*. Education and formation for ordained ministry are accomplished in a complex ecology. Seminary, by itself, is inadequate preparation for a lifetime of ministry. We assume that God summons us to ministry and equips with a capacity for ministry. The church depends upon congregations to identify worthy candidates for orders. The church depends upon the seminary to equip candidates with basic yet complicated theological skills for ministry. The church depends upon Boards of Ordained Ministry to supervise "decompressing" seminary education (probationary period) and providing for and holding clergy accountable to be life-long learners.

When constructed well, this complex ecology is premised upon the practices of helping Christians of all ages identify the ministry to which God has summoned and to equip them through the ministries of the church. Collectively, these practices are becoming known as the *culture of the call*.²

A major problem is that the culture of the call, as it was practiced in previous generations, has crumbled. Many congregations and clergy neglect to speak positively and frequently about the call to ministry. A generation or so ago, churches attended to, and even created, occasions to play Eli to Samuel—places and times to help young people identify God's voice and their call. In youth groups, conference events, campus ministries, and pastoral conversations, gifted members were invited to ponder a call to "full-time Christian service." Today, relatively few congregations can claim that anyone within their midst in recent years candidated for ordained ministry. Moreover, many clergy are reticent to speak of the call to ministry. There are few venues in which the ordained confess the meaning and joy that their ministry can entail.

We need to construct a new culture of the call. We need to find ways to help persons—of all ages, from all racial

ethnic groups, from all careers—to hear Christ’s knock, to discern the call, and to open the door. Re-constructing the culture of the call will require attention from every congregation, board, and agency in the church.

The ordained could advance the re-building effort through the following:

- *Tend to your vocation.* Take time, make space to attend to your vocation. How do you feel and think about your calling today? Last January, Craig Dykstra from the Lilly Endowment spoke with seminary educators. He stated that, based on a recent and extensive study, about a third of the clergy active today are content and believe they are effective in ministry. A second third is confused. And, the last third is clinically depressed. If this study is correct, lots of us have neglected our vocations. Many of us need time to rest, renew, re-think, and—yes, re-consider ministry. You owe it to yourself, to your family/friends, to the church, and to the Christ you serve.
- *Ask yourself: have I been attentive to opportunities to be as Eli to Samuel?* If not, why? If so, to what end? When was the last time the congregation you served help “raise” a candidate for ordained ministry?
- *Plan a vocation Sunday.* Certainly, our task of making disciples of Jesus Christ involves helping all persons frame their calling and career in terms of servant ministry. What would the life of your congregation look like if it were organized around identifying, equipping, and sending ministers? I know some of you are already there. If you are not, you might plan a Vocation Sunday to focus attention on this crucial issue.
- *Partner with a seminary in re-constructing the culture of the call.* I know first-hand that no seminary can partner with every individual or congregation that asks for educational resources. But if a group of clergy or congregations approached a seminary together, then developing a program with components such as educational events, workshops and retreats on vocation, and even “pre-seminary” education would be much more feasible.

Remember, it takes the whole church. . . . □

¹ The issue of servant leadership in the United Methodist Church is clearly a significant issue today. A full discussion would have to include lay ministries and local pastors, as well as the ordained.

² Wesley Theological Seminary was the first seminary, to my knowledge, to begin using the term.



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Recommended Resources

Bolles, Richard. Nelson. *What Color Is Your Parachute?: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers.* Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2001 edition (original 1970).

A modern “classic” by a former campus minister.

Groff, Kent Ira. *Active Spirituality: A Guide for Seekers and Ministers.* Alban Institute, 1993.

This is an outstanding book, solidly grounded in scripture and theology. It may be too complex for a beginning spiritual seeker. It is an excellent text for more mature folks—and for pastoral renewal.

Guinness, Os. *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life.* Nashville: Word, 1998.

Guinness is an evangelical and a layperson, often helpfully critical. The book is written in short chapters that can serve either as a series of daily reflections or may be read in one sitting.

Jones, Laurie Beth. *The Path: Creating Your Mission Statement for Work and for Life.* New York: Hyperion, 1996.

Jones has written a very helpful, step-by-step guide to discerning your top values and gifts. It could be profitably used by folks 18 and over. For practical usefulness, her text is hard to beat.

Miller, Arthur F. *Why You Can't Be Anything You Want to Be.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999.

Miller focuses on the indicators of what we are born and nurtured to do well and to strengthen our ability to use those gifts.

Parks, Sharon Daloz. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Parks is one of the foremost authorities on young adult life. This is a careful, complex book written for mentors.

At Garrett-Evangelical, we published a booklet for the 2001 annual conference season entitled *Opening the Door: Pastoral Resources for Re-Constructing the Culture of the Call.* A limited number of copies are still available. E-mail me to request one (Gary.Peluso@garrett.edu).

Web Sites:

Wesley Seminary: www.wesleysem.edu

Saint Paul School of Theology: www.spst.edu, follow the *Call to Ministry* Link

The Alban Institute: www.alban.org

Indianapolis Center for Congregations (great example of a partnership): www.centerforcongregations.org.

Lantz Center for Christian Vocations (example of what one college has done to work on vocations at the undergraduate level): <http://vocations.uindy.edu>.

Jackson Carroll at Duke is leading a study of clergy. www.divinity.duke.edu/dplp/index.pl