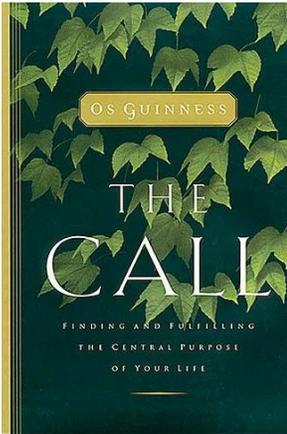


THE CALL TO PASTORAL MINISTRY

GCI pastoral intern discussion starter

by Ted Johnston



Recommended reading:

The Call by Os Guinness,
Pages 1-55.

God’s calling to landscape architecture came to me through the advice and counsel of other believers who knew me well. That’s how God often speaks. But in the case of his call to pastoral ministry, God spoke to me more directly. It was not that I heard his voice audibly, nonetheless, I heard him clearly. There was a deep, compelling sense that this is what I *must do*.



Hearing God’s call

As Christians, we want to follow God’s direction for our lives. Also, we believe that God has a particular calling for each of us. That calling is the central purpose for our lives and involves how the Holy Spirit is leading us share with Jesus in his ongoing ministry on earth. That sharing potentially involves all sorts of life vocations. The question is not which vocation is “better,” but, “to which vocation has God called me?”

In this discussion starter, I will share my story and related insights from Os Guinness’ helpful book, *The Call*. These are given to help you think about God’s call on your life—potentially to pastoral ministry within GCI. My prayer is that this tool will help you hear God’s word to you clearly and then respond, not out of a sense of mere obligation or duty, but with “the obedience that comes from faith” (Romans 1:5, NIV).

My story

Following graduation from high school in Indiana, I attended Ambassador College in Southern California. There I started working part-time as a landscape draftsman. My boss noted my ability in that area and suggested I pursue a degree in landscape architecture.

I took his suggestion and transferred to Cal Poly, earned a degree and then entered that profession where I worked for 15 years. I found that vocation very satisfying, and I believe God called me into that profession for a time. However, as often happens, God had another call on my life, for which I was being prepared—full-time pastoral ministry.

For a time, I tried not to let that inner voice dissuade me from the career I had been pursuing for 15 years. It’s not that I had anything against pastoral ministry (I was participating in pastoral ministry as a volunteer); it was just that vocational pastoral ministry was not on my “radar screen” at the time. However, the inner voice never quieted. In fact, it grew louder, until I could no longer ignore it.

Leaving a successful vocation mid-career made no sense “on paper.” It meant halving my salary. It meant pulling up roots and moving my young family (wife plus two children). In short, it meant huge upheaval. But God would not let me rest.

And so I began discussing the issue with trusted friends, some who were pastors. Most tried to talk me out of it—they were concerned that the sacrifice was too great. I respected their viewpoints, but God’s calling to me was far louder than their advice.

To help clarify his will, God sent circumstances, which presented the proverbial, “fork in the road.” The consulting company where I worked decided to move me to Arizona to start a new office. And so my family was looking at upheaval no matter which fork I chose.

Clearly, God was nudging me—not forcing my choice, but facilitating it. I’m convinced that either choice would have worked out for good. But I felt deep within that God’s will for me was pastoral ministry. So, that’s the fork I chose over 25 years ago. And that changed everything. Has it been easy? No. Has it been rewarding? Absolutely; in many ways.

Your story

Will the way God calls you be just like the way he called me? Not likely— God works with each of us in deeply personal ways. He knows you better than you know yourself, and so he will speak to you accordingly.

I encourage you to listen carefully and prayerfully—and to do so in the company of other mature believers. I spent many hours on my knees asking God to speak to me clearly—to reveal his will so that I might understand it and obey it. God heard my prayers and answered. And he has always been faithful to help me obey his call, despite many obstacles and doubts. For that I give him thanks, and I ask that he grant you the same grace. I trust that he will.

Discussion Starter Questions—part 1

As we leave my story, here are two questions for you to discuss with your Life-Mentor:

1. Are you hearing a call from God to vocational pastoral ministry? In what way has God spoken? What has been your response?
2. If you’re not sure concerning this call, what are you lacking that would bring you to a point of certainty? What do you think you should do in seeking that certainty? Is it even necessary to be certain?

Advice from Os Guinness

In *The Call*, Os asks and answers a question of great relevance here: “How do I find and fulfill the central purpose of my life?” Of course, there is no single answer. In fact, there are myriad ways. Os quotes Søren Kierkegaard who wrote that, “The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wants *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true *for me*, to find the *idea for which I can live and die.*”

First and foremost, God calls us to himself—to a life that is *by him, to him and for him*. As you embrace and follow him, he will reveal to you what he has for you to do *with him*. This call typically concerns his direction about a particular life vocation.

God calls us to what he has created us to be, not a negation of who we are. As Os writes on page 25, “only when we respond to Christ and follow his call do we become our real selves and come to have personalities of our own.” Indeed, obeying God’s call leads us beyond mere success to real significance.

It should be emphasized that God’s call is not only to “church work.” We make a mistake in seeing some callings in life as secular and others as sacred. In Christ, all vocations have great redemptive value—they are all part of God’s good work in us, for us and through us.

How do we know what vocation is God’s will for us? There is no single or simple answer. However, Os offers the following helpful clues—discuss these with your Life-Mentor and evaluate your experiences to date.

Discussion Starter Questions—part 2

1. God normally calls us along the lines of our giftedness. But note that this is giftedness to serve others, not simply to please or prosper ourselves or our own family.
2. God’s call to us will not be merely individual—it always is in the context of a call that involves other followers of Jesus. This is why seeking the input of other mature believers is crucial.
3. God gives special callings at certain times, but we need not wait for that, because he always is calling us to follow and serve him. Thus, there is no excuse for sitting around waiting for a special, supernatural call. Sometimes God is waiting for us to take a step forward.
4. Because we live and minister in a fallen world, we should not expect a perfect alignment of our gifts, desires and calling. There will always be struggle and doubt, and Jesus walks there with us as part of our calling to his service.
5. In some ways, there will be *clarity* to our call; but in other ways, there will be *mystery*. If you are looking for absolute clarity, you will not likely find it. Sometimes the clarity will come only as you look backward to past events, now made clear through the perspective of time. Remember we walk by faith, not sight.

May you hear God clearly and obey him in faith, so that with Martin Luther, the great theologian and reformer, you can say, “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.”