

The CALL to LEADERSHIP

Have you ever stared up at the sky and said “God just TELL me and I’ll DO it!”?

Guidance and discerning God’s call can be a frustrating exercise and you can sometimes be forgiven for thinking you are caught in some cosmic game of twenty questions, searching fruitlessly for clear answers while time and guesses run out.

“Am I called to work with young people? Or am I doing it because I want to – or can think of nothing better to do to serve God?” The questions persist both before we commit to working with young people and perhaps more disconcertingly, after.

Yet for all the pondering, praying and uncertainty we are not left completely in the dark about what constitutes a call. There are signs that God leaves dotted along the way. As we increasingly come to desire Him and His will, these signs or “senses” will begin to become apparent.

The true call of a Christian is not to do extraordinary things, but to do ordinary things in an extraordinary way.¹

Rather than tell us *what* to do, God often guides us as we *begin* to do, so if you are still unsure of your call to youth ministry, set out on your journey into leadership and He will confirm or correct your sense of call as time goes on.

1. A Sense of RESPONSIBILITY

When **Nehemiah** received the news that the “wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been burned”, he was so burdened that he sat down and wept before praying and fasting for days.² His reaction formed the basis of his call and soon he was on his way to Jerusalem to rectify the situation.

Isaiah saw the Lord. “He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple.” When asked “Who will go?” Isaiah’s response was immediate: ““Lord, I’ll go! Send me”, to which the Lord replied, “Yes, go”.³

“My going to Ecuador is God’s counsel, as is my leaving Betty, and my refusal to be counseled by all who insist I stay and stir up the believers in the U.S. And how do I know it is His counsel? ‘Yea my heart instructeth me in the night seasons’. Oh how good! For I have known my heart is speaking to me for God! No visions, no voices, but the counsel of a heart which desires God.”⁴

- Jim Elliot, martyred missionary to the Aucas

One night as **Paul** slept he had a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading, “Come over here and help us”. Concluding it was a call from God, Paul and Silas changed their travel plans and responded.⁵

Here we see three quite different “calls” yet all three have one thing in common. On each occasion the person concerned became aware of a need and felt some sense of divine personal responsibility to do something about it.

Seldom does the awareness of a need and a sense of responsibility come about through visions. More commonly it is less spectacular and more ambiguous, but no less real. Very effective youth workers come to this sense of call in different ways. There is no single way in which this burden of responsibility becomes evident. Yet there are patterns common to

many that can help us in determining our own sense of call.

Below are listed four categories that describe ways in which God may “call” us. Our involvement in youth work can come about through any of these or through different combinations of the four. No one category of call is better than another because all originate in God and are according to His purposes.

The first category is **Conviction** or one of saying “*I must!*” Here the sense of responsibility is an inner urge or desire that comes through a sudden or growing sense of “knowing” that this is God’s will for us. It is often strong and even unmistakable to the point that we feel as though we have little choice but to become involved, so great is the sense of urgency we feel when confronted with the need.

The second category is **Choice** or one of saying “*I will!*”. In this instance we become aware of a need and decide to act. Perhaps someone has approached us and asked us to help out on the youth ministry team. We agree although without any overwhelming sense of God’s call. We have simply chosen to serve because of the need and opportunity that was presented to us.

The third category is **Circumstance** or one of saying “*I may as well!*”. Here we become involved in leadership through one or more circumstances. We may have offered to help out now and then and over time found ourselves more involved than we had expected. A friend or a spouse might have wanted to get involved and so we simply went along and joined in. Or perhaps young people kept coming to us with their problems and eventually we took on some official responsibility.

The fourth category is **Coercion** or one of saying “*It seems I should!*”. This is when we become involved because people urged us to help. It is not that we are leading against our will, but someone, perhaps a pastor, a current leader, or a young person convinced us that we had something to offer.

On 10 September 1946 during the train ride from Calcutta to Darjeeling for her annual retreat, Mother Teresa received her “inspiration,” her “call within a call.” On that day, in a way she would never explain, Jesus’ thirst for love and for souls took hold of her heart and the desire to satiate His thirst became the driving force of her life.⁶

From experience...

I became a youth leader because I was too old for youth group. It was the end of the year and I commented to my youth leader that I would not be coming back the following year. Yet somehow in our conversation it came up that I might be available to help out in some small way in future. The “small way” saw me leading a weekly Bible study for a mixed group of thirteen year old boys and girls. To my surprise they seemed to enjoy my leadership and to my even greater surprise, I enjoyed leading them!

Was I “called” when I made myself available to help? If you had asked me then I would have expressed doubt. “I just made myself available - that’s all”, is what I would have said.

If you had asked me after my first year of leadership if I was “called”, again I would have hesitated, this time saying “Well, I enjoy it!”

Looking back now I was undoubtedly called. The call has become clearer over time. I saw a need and I made myself available. Most calls start that simply.

2. A Sense of INADEQUACY

When God appeared to **Moses** in the midst of a burning bush and called him to lead His people out of slavery, he was less than enthusiastic. The thing that bothered him the most was that he lacked the ability to speak well in public.⁷

Gideon was of the tribe of Manasseh, the smallest tribe in Israel. His clan was the weakest and he considered himself the least in his family. Imagine his surprise and doubt when the Angel of the Lord addressed him as a “mighty man of valour” and called him to lead the Israelites against the powerful Midianite army.⁸

*It is not my ability, but my
response to God’s ability
that counts.*

- Corrie ten Boom

When the Lord delivered a message to **Jeremiah** calling him to be His “spokesman to the world”, Jeremiah protested. “I can’t speak for you! I’m too young!” Yet God insisted and Jeremiah became one of the greatest prophets ever seen in Israel.⁹

What these three “called” leaders shared in common was a healthy sense of their own inadequacy. Such a sense, rather than disqualifying someone from being called, can actually become a powerful indicator that they really *are* called.

Like all three, perhaps we find ourselves saying, “I can’t do this”, yet God instructs us, as He did them, not to be afraid of the people we are to lead and proceed in obedience. As we step out and lead, we do so in absolute reliance upon God, for we have nothing to offer in and of ourselves. All we can offer is Him in us.

3. A Sense of FAITH IN GOD

When the prophet Samuel was directed by God to go to the house of Jesse to anoint a new king in Israel, he instructed Jesse to gather together all his sons. Yet one by one, as impressive as they all looked, God said “No” to each one. Finally, when Samuel asked Jesse if he had any other sons, Jesse replied “There is still the youngest”. Perhaps he was thinking – “surely this young lad could never be king!” But when **David** was brought before Samuel the Lord whispered, “This is the one; anoint him.” Eventually David, despite the fact that not even his own father saw the potential in him, went on to become Israel’s greatest king.¹¹

“Lord”, I cried out, “If only I could do something to help.” But how could someone as insignificant as myself make even a tiny dent in a problem so great? On my own I could do nothing, but with God, maybe I could.¹⁰

- Charla Pereau, Mexican orphanage founder

A virgin betrothed to be married had an encounter with the Angel Gabriel and was told that she was to become pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Despite the fear of what people, not least her husband-to-be, might say, **Mary** responded, “I am the Lord’s servant, and I am willing to accept whatever He wants.”¹²

An insignificant Jewish orphan named **Esther** found herself in a position where she alone could save her people from destruction. Married to the king she risked death, undertaking a daring rescue plan by entering his presence without being called.¹³

CHECKLIST:

- I feel a somewhat overwhelmed as I look at my leadership responsibilities.
- I often wonder, "Why am I doing this – I'm sure there are others who could do it better."
- At times I find myself feeling ill-prepared and inadequate for the task of youth ministry.
- I feel out of touch and even a little fearful of young people and their world.
- I love young people even when they are difficult to love.
- Despite my own inadequacies I have a sense that God is willing and able to work through me in our youth ministry.

All three faced great challenges. All three could be expected to feel inadequate. Yet all three rose to the challenge and exercised faith in order to overcome their fears.

In being called to youth ministry we may and should feel inadequate. We may feel we lack the skills or the understanding required to lead. We may feel out of touch with the world of young people or be fearful of them. But with this sense of inadequacy must come a sense of God's adequacy. Through faith in Him we choose to follow our call, not because we believe we can do it, but because we believe God can do it through us.

When we serve God this way, any success we experience is met with humility and genuine surprise. We are not tempted to rob Him of the glory because in our heart we know it was *Him*, not us who accomplished these deeds.

From experience...

When I went to serve in my first church as a youth pastor I felt completely inadequate for the task that lay ahead. In fact my initial reaction was to turn the call down. Yet after attending the interview I knew in my heart beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was called and I knew that if God called me then He would empower and assist me.

So often in those earlier days I prayed the prayer of Solomon, "Lord, give me wisdom!" And time and again He did, so that by His grace the ministry in those early days went from strength to strength. No one was more surprised than me at the growth in numbers and the growth in spiritual vitality. It was not my doing. It was His.

4. A Sense of CONFIRMATION

A young man named **Elisha** was out ploughing in his field when the prophet Elijah passed by. Elijah, knowing that his time as a leader in Israel was nearing an end, cast his cloak upon Elisha – a symbolic act that indicated he was passing on his God given leadership role to the young man.¹⁵

John Mark had let down Paul and Barnabas, returning early from a missionary journey when things got too tough. On a subsequent journey it was Bartholomew who invited John Mark to once more join him recognising the potential in this young leader who had previously failed.¹⁶

Paul wrote a letter to a young church leader called **Timothy** who was struggling with some tough issues in his ministry. In this letter he reminded Timothy of his Christian heritage and calling, urging him to press on and be faithful to this calling despite fears and misgivings.¹⁷

In each of these examples we see an older believer calling, encouraging and exhorting a younger believer to leadership. Undoubtedly the confirmation they bestowed on these young leaders helped them confirm their sense of call and saw them go on to fulfil God's purposes in their lives.

As we step out and lead, relying on God to work through us, it is natural that some doubts may persist. We find ourselves wondering, "Is this *really* God or my own imagination and desire?" In order to assure us of our call (or otherwise), God will use various means to confirm our effectiveness and our call. None of these alone completely assure us that we are called but collectively they start to paint a clear picture of what God has for us. They give us a confidence that helps us press through the hard times knowing that we are called by the Master.

The day Billy went to him for guidance Dean Minder avoided the subject by greeting him with: "Bill, I was just going to send for you. The preacher at the United Brethren church in town is going away and wants someone to fill in for him. I suggested you." "I don't think I should," Billy said, "especially after my last debacle."

"What in the world are you talking about? I thought you did well." Billy shook his head. "I don't think I'm ready yet." "That's not for you to decide," said the Dean.

"Now, you know where the church is; the service is at eleven o'clock. Be there."¹⁴

- The Inspiring Life and Thoughts of Billy Graham

God's part of the call dynamic is to initiate, guide, position and intervene. The leader's part of the call drama is to hear, respond, search and order or re-order life.¹⁸

The first way in which God may confirm our call is through a sense of inner **fulfilment**. Serving God in the place where He calls will bring a degree of satisfaction and joy. That's not to say you will be happy every moment you serve, or that you will always find it enjoyable! What you will notice over time though is a sense of satisfaction that comes from serving Him. There may be times you don't feel like going to youth group, but that doesn't mean you should quit.

A second means through which God commonly confirms our call is through the **feedback** of others. Often people see in us things that we ourselves are blind to, and so the first place to go in seeking confirmation of your call is other leaders, especially those who oversee what you do. They know what is required of a leader and are better able to spot potential in you than you are yourself.

The confirmation of our call to youth ministry can also come through the same young people whom we lead. Their encouragement and feedback may make us see that perhaps we *do* have something to offer them after all. However don't confuse popularity with calling. Just because they "like" you doesn't necessarily mean your call is being confirmed. Look instead for things like trust, respect, and admiration.

From experience...

I recall once a very good young leader saying to me, "When you asked me to become a leader I didn't think I could do it. The only reason I said 'yes' was that you believed I could do it." The conversation reminded me of the power of a leader's opinion on a person's sense of call.

A final way in which our call can be confirmed is through the lasting **fruit** that results from our ministry. Are young people coming to know Christ and desiring to grow in their faith through the input you are providing? When you speak do they listen? Does your life have an impact upon them? The difficulty here is that in youth ministry results are not always immediately apparent and can take time. A lack of obvious "fruit" does not necessarily mean you are not called. Much fruit, particularly that which others observe, indicate you may be.

5. A Sense of GROWTH

Another indicator that we are called to youth leadership is evidence of growth in our own life. This growth can occur in a number of areas:

The first of these is **growth as a Christian**. It is useful to ask yourself the question, “Is youth leadership drawing me closer to God?” Note that this is not the same as, “Is youth leadership making me a happy Christian?”! Sometimes it is the tough times in leadership that produce the most personal growth.

The second area is **growth in character**. Young people have a knack of exposing weaknesses in our ability to love unconditionally. If your character is being tested and you are growing in the fruit of the Spirit then chances are you are called.

The final area is **growth as a leader**.

A true leader will want to improve so the fact you are taking the time to read this book is a good indicator that you are called! When faced with situations they find difficult a person who is called to lead will look to find answers that will enhance their ability to lead, rather than simply giving up.

CHECKLIST:

- Other leaders express the conviction that I’m called to lead.
- At times the young people indicate that they appreciate my leadership.
- There is evidence of fruit in my ministry.
- Leadership causing me to grow more quickly as a Christian.
- Leadership developing greater character in my life.
- I see within myself the desire and effort to want to be a more effective leader.

From experience...

One of the most important leadership lessons I learnt was that God was more interested in making me a great minister than in giving me a great ministry. There were seasons in which the ministry was going great and seasons in which it was not. It was through these latter seasons that God did His “great” work in me and produced the greatest growth. Yet the temptation in these times was to doubt my call.

For REFLECTION and DISCUSSION

1. Why did you decide to become a youth leader? Which of the four categories of call most apply to you?
2. What are the situations or areas of leadership in which you feel most inadequate?
3. How has God helped you cope with the challenges of leadership? What further help would you like Him to give?
4. What or who has helped confirm your call to youth ministry?
5. How has being in leadership helped you to grow?

Prayer:

Confess your inadequacy to God and ask His help and enabling. If you doubt your call, ask Him for a clearer sense of confirmation.

Practical insights which I will apply:

Endnotes:

1. The CALL to LEADERSHIP

- 1 Stanley, D., Dean of Westminster, UK. (source unknown)
- 2 *Nehemiah 1:1-11*
- 3 *Isaiah 6:1-13*
- 4 Elliot, E. *Through Gates of Splendour*. STL Books, 1956, p.14
- 5 *Acts 16:9-12*
- 6 http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20031019_madre-teresa_en.html
- 7 *Exodus 3:1-4:17*
- 8 *Judges 6:11-24*
- 9 *Jeremiah 1:1-10*
- 10 Perea, C. *Charla's Children*. Foundation for His Ministry, 1981, p.64-65
- 11 *1 Samuel 16:1-13*
- 12 *Luke 1:26-38*
- 13 *Esther 3:7-5:8*
- 14 Daniels, G. *The Inspiring Life and Thoughts of Billy Graham*. Paperback Library, 1961, p.43
- 15 *1 Kings 19:19-21*
- 16 *Acts 15:36-39*
- 17 *2 Timothy 1:3-10*
- 18 McNeal, R. *A Work of Heart*, Jossey Bass, 2000, p.95