

■ The Call

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

(Mark 1:16-20, NRSV)

Throughout the witness of Christian scriptures and the life of the Church, God has called women and men to follow Jesus into a lifetime of ministry and service. Abraham, Moses, Deborah, Jeremiah, Mary, Peter, and Paul are examples of those hearing and responding to God’s call.

The journey you are beginning is your faithful response to God’s call. As you tell people you are pursuing a call to the ministry, they will ask questions you may find difficult to answer: “What kind of ministry are you called to?” “Do you want to be ordained?” “Do you think you’ll pastor a church someday?” “Where is God calling you to go?” Remember, you are just beginning; so take some pressure off yourself! You don’t need clear answers to those questions at this point. Instead, concern yourself with seeking God’s heart, which is truly the central concern of this journey from start to finish.

What does it mean to be "called"?

As a Christian, you are called to ministry. For example, giving your life to Christ involves you in ministry in Christ’s body, the Church: "God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies." (1 Peter 4:9-10 NLT) When used in this broad sense, calling also involves being salt and light as we interact with believers and nonbelievers alike in the course of our day-to-day lives (1 Cor 10:31; 1 Peter 2:12).

Along with this calling of all followers of Jesus, God calls some women and men to specific roles and responsibilities in ministry as their primary vocation in life. This is the sense in which the language of calling is most often used in this handbook. This calling may be fulfilled in conjunction with another vocation from which a person may draw his or her livelihood. And some who have received such a calling may fulfill that calling as lay members of the Church rather than through pursuing ordination. Examples include a missionary serving in a role not requiring a ministerial credential, a lay pastor, a Christian counselor, or those serving with a parachurch ministry, camping ministry, or other nonprofit.

Others fulfill their specific calling as members of the clergy, serving in roles and responsibilities that are best served by or require someone who holds a ministerial credential. Many of these are called to teach and preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. With this specific calling comes the title and responsibility of pastor, the shepherd of the people of God. If this title intimidates you or doesn't seem to fit at this point, open your heart and mind to follow God wherever this journey might lead. Let God shape your vision of calling, not fear or intimidation.

Some who witness to a specific calling to ministry, experience that calling with clarity from the start. Some have described sensing a call to be a missionary, for example. For others, the sense of calling to ministry emerges into clarity over time. If at some point along this journey you discern that continuing on a path of educational preparation for ministry leading toward ordination may not be the best path forward, explore other avenues of response to your calling in consultation with your pastor and other mature believers. On the other hand, if you discern (prayerfully and in consultation with your pastor and other mature believers) that ordained ministry is the way God is leading you to embrace your calling, then the journey described in this handbook has just begun!

Pray about your call

Whatever your call, you are clearly hearing God speaking to you in some way. This needs to be a season of deepening your prayer life. Prayer is an expression of devotion to the God who is calling you, and is essential to discerning His leading at every point, from selecting the right educational pathway to determining how and where to gain ministry experience. As you learn to listen to the Spirit speaking, don't become frustrated if clarity doesn't come right away concerning questions you may have about your calling or where your preparation will ultimately lead you. Instead, move forward prayerfully and with the helpful counsel of wise and godly people in your life, trusting God to give direction along the way.

Discovering gifts and graces for ministry

An important part of exploring your call is discovering the gifts and graces God has given you for ministry in the church. Your journey partners, pastor, church board, and district boards of ministry, will help you identify these as you pursue God's calling as you understand it at this time. Remember, you are not alone on this journey! Gifts and graces for ordained ministry become evident through the exposure and experience you gain by engaging in a variety of ministry opportunities. The church recognizes numerous expressions of vocational ministry arising from the gifts and graces given us. Reading Manual paragraphs 500-526.1 will help you gain a clearer understanding of this important point.

Register your call

If you are sensing that preparing for ordained ministry may be the appropriate response to your calling as you understand it at this time, one of your first steps is to discuss this with your pastor. He or she may suggest you are ready to take the next steps on your journey: applying for a Local Minister's License (see the section on Licensing and Ministry Experience) and registering your call with your District Board of Ministry. Registering your call creates a connection with your district and provides the Board of Ministry with the information it needs to help guide you in your educational preparation and in the credentialing process. Ask your pastor if your district has developed its own registration process. If so, follow that process; If not, you may wish to complete and submit the form found in Appendix B.