



**What am I going to do with my life?**

**How can I make a difference?**

**For what purpose was I created?**

**Am I called to be a minister?**

## How do I know if I am called to be a minister?

This is a question asked and often agonized over by women and men down through the years. Is God "calling" me to be a minister? What does that "call" look/sound/feel like? How do I know if it is true? What shape might that call take in my life? This resource is designed to assist persons who are asking such questions or, perhaps, have been asked by someone they trust to consider such questions.

### Call

First, let's explore what we mean by the word "call." One of the best known description of the call to Christian ministry was developed by H. Richard Niebuhr. He identified **four aspects of call**.

- The "**call to be a Christian**" is the necessary first call to any type of ministry.
- Then, the "**secret**" call happens between God and the individual where one feels an inward invitation to become a minister.
- The third call Niebuhr named the "**providential call**." This calling acknowledges the gifts for ministry given by God and includes intellectual, spiritual, psychological and moral attributes.
- Finally, the "**ecclesiastical call**" is the acceptance of the individual by the church and takes the form in the UCC of being offered a call by a local church or other calling body and being ordained.

**Exercise:** Take some time to think about Niebuhr's four aspects of call. Which of these have you experienced? What was that like? How is your call to be a Christian related to your discernment of a possible call to be an ordained or lay minister?



Take a look at the handout from Manual on Ministry entitled "Church's Expectations of Its Candidates for Ordained Ministry." You can find this in the appendix in the back of this resource or in the online version of the Manual on Ministry at [www.ucc.org/ministers/manual](http://www.ucc.org/ministers/manual) Look in Section 3 page 33 for the Expectations. Read slowly and prayerfully through this list. Do you find any evidence of the "providential call" in your life? Are there any attributes that others (your pastor, church leaders, trusted friends and relatives, etc.) have identified in you? Do you notice any areas that would be a challenge or will need further education, training, counseling or guidance to develop?

In the United Church of Christ, we value call from several perspectives. First, we acknowledge that all Christians are called by God. Our primary vocation is to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. In the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ it states:

*The United Church of Christ recognizes that God calls the whole Church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the Gospel in church and society. The United Church of Christ seeks to undergird the ministry of its members by*

*nurturing faith, calling forth gifts, and equipping members for Christian service.*

This is very much in line with the understanding of ministry we find in scripture. In I Corinthians chapter 12 Paul proclaims: *to each has been given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* In fact, the whole imagery of this chapter



reminds us that as members of the Body of Christ we have gifts that differ from one another in form and function so that, together, we can be faithful witnesses and disciples of Jesus the Christ. **We are ALL called by God.** It is only the particular shape of each call that varies.

Next then, we honor the fact that some persons experience a sense of inner call to particular forms of ministry in the UCC. This calling may take the shape of ordained, licensed or commissioned ministry. We call these "authorized" ministries. We believe that the discernment of the particular shape of that inner call is the joint responsibility of the person and the church embodied in a local congregation and the Association/Conference. The interplay of this "inward" call confirmed by an "outward" call of the community is expressed in our Constitution and Bylaws:

*The United Church of Christ recognizes that God calls certain of its members to various forms of ministry in and on behalf of the church for which ecclesiastical authorization is granted by an Association through the rite of ordination, through commissioning, licensing, granting either ordained ministerial standing or ordained ministerial partner standing or other acts of authorization.*

Although the language of the Constitution may seem a bit

formal, it highlights that, while a person may sense an inner call to ministry, in the UCC it is the community of faith that "authorizes" a person to act as a pastor or other minister on behalf of the entire United Church of Christ.



**Exercise:** (1) As you read the wording of the UCC Constitution, where do you see similarities and differences with Niebuhr's understanding of call? Have a discussion with your pastor about how s/he experienced a "call" to ministry. What was the role of the church/faith community in discerning and authorizing her or his call?

(2) Look up I Corinthians 12 in the Bible. How does Paul's image of the Body of Christ help you to understand the place of all shapes and sorts or vocations?

## Ways of Experiencing Call

There are many ways in which persons experience a call to ministry. In fact, the ways are as varied as the people whom God calls! However, there are some common themes that we might explore.

For some, discerning a call to ministry feels like **Stepping Stones**. Some persons experience entry into ordained or lay professional ministry as a growing sense of "rightness." This is something they've always known on some level or another. Each "step" of their life feels



like another marker along the journey.

Others experience call more like a **Labyrinth**. For these persons, the journey of discernment has many twists and turns, times of uncertainty, times when their goal seems certain and other times when it seems far off. But, the journey itself seems to be a drawing closer to God.



Still others feel pursued by God. Perhaps we might call this the **Hound of Heaven** experience. It echoes the experience of poet Francis Thompson who wrote a poem by that title in the late 1800's about feeling pursued by God as if God were a great hound.

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days,*

*I fled Him, down the arches of the years;*

*I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways*

*Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears*

*I hid from Him, and under running laughter.*

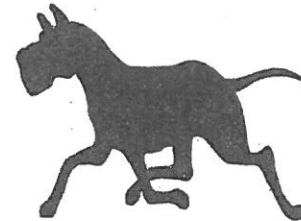
*Up vistaed hopes I sped;*

*And shot, precipitated*

*Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,*

*From those strong Feet that followed, followed after ...*

In the African American tradition, this experience is described in varying ways. Gerald Davis says, "When you're born, preaching is in you. And when the time comes it stirs, God stirs it up." In William H. Myers' book *God's Yes Was Louder Than*



My No, he described the African American experience of call as involving several stages:

- **direct experience** of the divine call that can be articulated to others
- **struggle** with self, God and the community
- **search** for answers and human validation
- **surrender.**

Still other persons experience call as coming directly from the community of faith. Perhaps we might describe



this experience as: **The Church Wants You!**

In some traditions, such as Native American, Hawaiian, and several other traditions, pastoral leadership is raised up from the midst of the community. When the community has need of leadership, they seek to discern someone in their midst who has the gifts and graces they believe are needed within the community. Then, the person is approached and "called" out of the midst of the church for leadership. Small rural and urban congregations are also starting to look to this way of finding pastoral leadership. Of course, those who are "called" in this way must then listen for God's inner confirmation as well. Then, these men and women seek the training, study, support and mentoring needed to answer the call.

**Exercise:** Consider the material above. Do any of these experiences sound like your own? How so? How has your experience of call differed from these experiences?

**Suggestion:** Spend time walking a labyrinth and meditating on your sense of vocation or questions about call. Many retreat centers and even local churches have labyrinths. If walking a labyrinth is not an option for you, try using a picture of one from

the resources and tracing it slowly with your finger. Or, you can have an interactive experience by going to [www.labyrinthonline.com](http://www.labyrinthonline.com). You might also try reading the entire poem from Francis Thompson and see if there are places of connection/disconnection for you.

## Descriptions of Vocation

Many different authors have attempted to describe what vocation is about. A few of their reflections are offered here.



The poet **Rainer Maria Rilke** in his book, *Letters to a Young Poet*, uses powerful, evocative language to try to help a young man discern a vocation to be a poet. Rilke wrote:

*There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself. Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write. This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. And if this answer rings out in assent, if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple "I must," then build your life in accordance with this necessity; your whole life, even into its humblest and most indifferent hour, must become a sign and witness to this impulse.*

**Frederick Buechner** is an author often quoted on the subject of vocation. He offers the following definition of vocation in his book, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*:

*There are different kinds of voices calling you to*

different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to do is work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world needs most to have done.

The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.



Writer, Biblical scholar and minister, **Reneeta Weems** offers a woman's view of wrestling with issues that are essentially vocational. In the introduction of her book, *Showing Mary*. She offers this description:

*You are on the verge of something special. You know it. You can feel it. Something is in the air. You are restless and don't know why. You wake up in the morning with flutters in your stomach even though your calendar doesn't indicate any special meetings scheduled for the day. Your mind is racing from thought to thought, and you can't figure out why. A voice in you won't be quieted, but you can't quite make out what it is saying. You wonder if you've forgotten something but you've forgotten what. Nothing has happened or is about to happen. But it is, and you sense it. Today is not the first time you've felt like this. This feeling has been coming in waves, off and on, for some time. You're on the verge of giving birth and don't know it.*



Here is a definition from **Thomas Merton**:

*Each one of us has some kind of vocation. We are all called by*

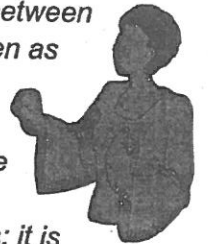
*God to share in His life and in His Kingdom. Each one of us is called to a special place in the Kingdom. If we find that place we will be happy. If we do not find it, we can never be completely happy. For each one of us, there is only one thing necessary: to fulfill our own destiny, according to God's will, to be what God wants us to be.*

These words are from **Sharon Daloz Parks**.

*The Dream, with a capital D... has a quality of vision. It is an imagined possibility that orients meaning, purpose, and aspiration,*

**William H. Myers** describes call from an African American perspective in the following manner:

*The call to ministry begins as a story; a story of an encounter between an individual and God ... the claimant comes to the community of faith for confirmation. At this point the story is transformed into narrative in order to persuade the community of the authenticity of the call. The difference between story and narrative is not necessarily to be seen as error or deception; rather, story is an individual's attempt to wrestle, as did Jacob and Paul, with God and self, and later narrative is the attempt to explain the transformative encounter in a way that makes sense to others; it is retrospective interpretation.*



Finally, here are the words of **Parker Palmer** from his book *Let Your Life Speak*:

*Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live*



– but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.

**Exercise:** Spend time with these authors' words.

Which resonate with you? Which do not? Are you aware of an intersection in your life between your deepest joy and the world's deepest hunger? What does that intersection look like for you? Spend time thinking and praying about the things you care for most – things that bring you joy, activities and values you hold dear. What did you want to be when you were little? How is that a reflection of some of your values? What do these things tell you about the life God wants to live in you?



## Companions on the Discernment Journey

As we have seen, discerning the shape of God's call in one's life is not something to be done in isolation. It is not only a matter between God and an

individual, but also involves the larger community. In the formal process in the United Church of Christ by which a person moves toward becoming an ordained, licensed or commissioned minister, the individual is supported by their local congregation, both pastor and people, as well as through an "In Care" process in that person's home Association. You can learn more about the In Care process on the Manual on Ministry, available online at [ucc.org/ministers/manual](http://ucc.org/ministers/manual). However, for some people there is a prior step needed. Before committing to a formal process of "In Care" exploration, some people simply want to explore whether God really might be calling them to ministry. One way of involving others in this process is by forming a "Discernment Committee." Modeled on the Quaker concept of a Clearness Committee, this group's

only tasks are to help the individual listen for God's voice and help that person reach some clarity around the nature of call in her or his life.

**Who should be on the committee?** It is best to ask people who know you fairly well. Good people to ask include: lay leaders from your church, the pastor (or one of the pastoral staff) and a friend or two. The committee doesn't have to be large, but it is important to have people who listen deeply for God in their own lives and are able and willing to ask you insightful questions that will help you become more clear about your sense of call, your gifts for ministry and those places in you that need further growth.

**How often does the committee meet?** Again, this is flexible. In the Quaker tradition, a "clearness committee" meets only once for three hours. However, for this purpose, one of the following schedules might be helpful. Quarterly meetings might work well for some. More frequent meetings for a limited amount of time such as once a month for six months might also be effective.

**What does the committee do?** The most important task of this committee is to LISTEN! They are listening for the voice of God in your life. They will ask questions to help you focus on your discernment process. You might choose to engage in Bible study using some of the material listed elsewhere in this resource. Or, you might use some of the suggested activities in this resource as a way to help you focus on the task at hand. This group's purpose is not to tell you what to do or even to offer advice. They will assist you to gain clarity about whether you will proceed to the next steps in asking your local congregation to recommend you to the Association as an In Care student. Once this occurs, another stage of discernment begins where your companions become the local church and

the Association. Their task is to help determine whether the particular call of God in your life is to authorized ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ.



## The Bible and Discerning Call

Throughout the pages of the Bible there are many stories of persons who were called by God to a variety of tasks and ministries. Here are some of those stories and questions to help you explore them in the context of your own life. One suggestion is to use *lectio divina* as a way of praying with these scriptures. A resource for understanding and using this spiritual practice is included in the appendix of this resource.

### The Call of Abram (Abraham) and Sarai (Sarah)

*Genesis 12:1-9*

One of the earliest reported "call" stories recorded in the Bible is found in Genesis when God commands Abram and Sarai to "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Gen. 12:1)

1. Read through the passage, perhaps using the *lectio divina* method. When you have had an opportunity to "chew" on this scripture, consider the following questions:
  - a. What were Abram and Sarai asked to leave behind in order to follow God?
  - b. What were they promised?
  - c. How was Abraham's faith expressed during this journey?

- d. What might you need to leave behind in order to follow where God leads? Who else will be affected?
- e. How do you understand God's promise in your life right now?
- f. How are you expressing your faith on this ongoing journey of discernment?

2. Spend time praying with the themes/questions/struggles which emerge.

## The Call of Moses

*Exodus, chapters 3&4*

No exploration of "call" would be complete without considering the call of Moses at the burning bush. Within this story are many elements to explore: the sacred appearance of the Divine, a clear command from God, and Moses' struggle to accept not only the call but that he had the right qualifications for the job.



Again, consider using *lectio divina* as a way of getting in touch with this story. Here are some questions to consider:

1. How was God present to Moses in this calling?
2. What arguments did Moses have for not feeling adequate for answering the call of God?
3. How did God address Moses' concerns?
4. What does Moses come to know about God and God's relationship to both himself and to the Israelite people in this



encounter?

5. What are your own concerns about your ability to answer God's call in your life? These would be good to bring to God in prayer where you can listen for God's answer.
6. What do you know about God's identity – God's presence in your life and the life of God's people? How have you learned this?

## Esther's Call

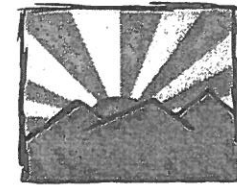
*Book of Esther, especially 4:13-17*

In the book of Esther we have the opportunity to explore another type of call. Esther, a Jew, finds herself in a position of power and influence as queen in the court of the Persian emperor. When the Jewish people are threatened, her uncle asks her to consider if God has raised her to a position of power "for such a time as this."

When you have time, read Esther's entire story. Pay special attention to the fourth chapter. Questions to consider:

1. As you read the story, what power did Esther have and what power did she NOT have?
2. What risk did Esther take in order to try to rescue her people?
3. How did she discern her course of action?
4. Consider times in your own life when you might have been challenged to use what you have been given for the benefit of others who were being oppressed. How did you respond?

5. Who has asked you to consider whether you, too, have been given gifts "for such a time as this?"



## The Call of Samuel

*1 Samuel 3:1-10*

This story of call reminds us that we sometimes need help distinguishing the voice of God from other voices. It is Samuel's mentor, Eli who first recognizes that God is calling the boy and helps him to know how to properly respond.

After reading the story consider the following questions:

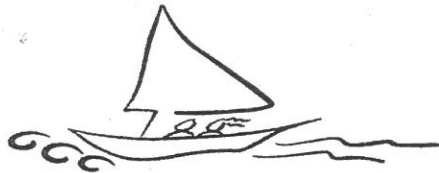
1. How does Eli discern that God is calling Samuel?
2. What do you suppose it means that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread?"
3. Who have been/are the mentors in your life who help you to discern God's voice?
4. How do you listen for God?
5. How do you know if the sense of call you feel is God or something else (like your own ego, or what someone else thinks you ought to do with your life, for instances)?

## The Call of the Disciples

*Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20, Luke 5:1-11, John 1:35-51*

All four gospels tell the story of Jesus' call to the first disciples. Three of the accounts are fairly similar. John's account looks at the event from a different perspective. Read all four accounts. Then, consider the following questions:

1. How do those called by Jesus respond? What differences do you notice between the four accounts?
2. What do you suppose Jesus meant when he told the fishermen that they would now be fishing for people?
3. In order to follow Jesus, what might change in your professional or personal life?
4. Have you ever felt like Peter in Luke's account where his response to Jesus is to ask him to "go away?"
5. Read, play or sing the New Century Hymnal hymn #173: *Tu' has venido a la orilla (You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore)* – see appendix– What does this hymn communicate about the experience of call?



### The Call of Paul

*(Acts 9:1-9 [10-19])*

The story of the conversion of Saul (Paul) is a powerful and evocative story of call. The writer of Acts presents it as a key turning point in the history of the early church. As you read this story, consider these questions:

1. What was it that enabled Saul to turn around?
2. Might the writer of Acts want us to understand Paul's physical blindness (vs. 8-9) as a symbol of something else? If so, what?
3. How does God call Ananias?
4. Both Saul and Ananias experience their encounter with God as a radical disconnection with what they had previously believed to be true. How do they deal with this?
5. How has God's call in your life caused you to re-think what you thought you knew to be true?
6. Has God spoken to you through dreams? If so, how? How have you heard God's voice/discerned God's desire for your life?



### Mary's Choice

*Luke 10:38-42*

Although not a classic story of "call," this scene between Jesus and the sisters, Mary and Martha, contain many elements of call: discerning God's desire, making choices and listening to Jesus even in the face of opposition. As you read the story, imagine yourself as one of the characters.

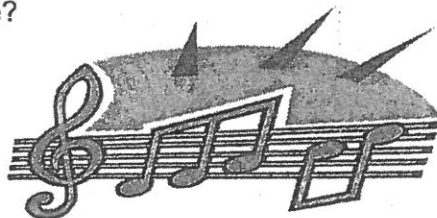
1. Who do you identify with? Why?
2. What prevents you from sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him?
3. What would it feel like to have permission and support to do just that?
4. How do you balance the "Martha" and "Mary" in you as you seek to discern your call to ministry?

### Another Mary's Call

Luke 1:26-38 (39-56)

It's not everyday that a person receives a visit from an angel! Yet, Luke tells us that is just what happened to Mary. The announcement of her "call" to be the mother of Jesus awakens all sorts of feelings and responses in this young woman. Her assent changes her life forever.

1. How did Mary respond to the angel's announcement?
2. The angel told her "do not be afraid." Is fear a part of the call experience? What do you fear about your own emerging sense of call?
3. What risks did Mary take in order to say "yes" to God?
4. What risks might you need to take to say "yes" to God?
5. In the Magnificat (vs. 46-56), Mary declares that God's coming turns everything upside-down. How is this a message you have experienced? How do you proclaim this message?



### Matthias' Call

(Acts 1:15-26)

Sometimes in the Bible a person is called out by the community to serve as a leader. This is the case for Matthias. Read the story of his call in Acts and consider these questions:

1. What was the need that prompted Matthias' call?
2. What were his qualifications?
3. How was he chosen?
4. Has the community called you? In what ways?
5. How is the need for "witnesses" to Christ a compelling reason to call persons to ministry?

There are many stories of call in the Bible. These are just a few to help you begin to explore the richness of the Biblical narrative. Perhaps some of your favorite stories of call aren't here. Make a list of other call stories you identify with and want to explore through *lectio divina*, group Bible study or individual reflection.

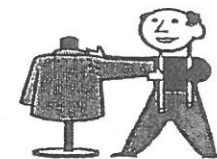
### Qualities for Ministry

While each person brings his or her own unique gifts and style to ministry, there are some general qualities to look for. These include:

- **Spiritually alive:** Pastors and other church professional need to cultivate their life with God. Developing spiritual disciplines and practices, taking time for retreats, seeing a spiritual director or spiritual friend regularly, setting aside time for prayer, meditation and study are all "habits of the heart" that keep us awake and able to not only nurture one's life with God but also be a resource for those with whom one ministers. Although this is certainly not exclusive to clergy, ministers must first and foremost be in love with God!

- **Sense of Wonder:** Are you someone who can see and sense God's presence in great and small things? Does this fill you with a feeling of thankfulness, curiosity and awe? These are essential qualities for ministry.
- **Life-long learning:** It is not enough to get the right degrees. Ministers need a love of learning to last a lifetime! Ministers must be always curious and questioning, taking advantage of opportunities to study, grow and develop. This helps clergy to be alive and responsive to the needs of God's people.
- **Emotional maturity:** It is very important for professional church leaders to have dealt with past issues that could otherwise get in the way of their effectiveness. Clergy must be willing to do their own inner work so they can be fully present to those with whom they minister. Ministers must also be able to recognize, set and maintain appropriate boundaries so they and their congregations can be healthy and safe.
- **Social skills:** In order to really find joy in the vocation of ministry it is important that a minister really, truly like people. Getting along with people, interacting in a variety of settings, and understanding and facilitating group dynamics are some of the things needed by successful clergy.
- **UCC Identity:** It is also very important that, if you wish to serve as a UCC pastor, you love our denomination. You should know UCC history and polity and be willing to communicate your knowledge and enthusiasm to others. Being connected and staying connected to the whole UCC family as well as our ecumenical partners is part of what it means to be UCC.

There are other important qualities and skills to consider, but these are some of the basics. "Try them on" and see how they fit for you!



## Conclusion

Hopefully this resource has offered some ways to help you on your journey toward discerning a call to ministry. Is God calling you to ministry? Perhaps. You must listen like Samuel for God's voice. You must be open like Mary to the risks and possibilities of following God's desire for you. You must listen like Matthias for the voice of the community as well. Whether your journey leads to authorized ministry or to a deeper understanding of your discipleship as a Christian, it is important to remember that God IS calling you!



**Prepared by Parish Life and Leadership,  
A ministry team of Local Church Ministries  
Of the United Church of Christ**



**Lynn Bujnak  
Minister for Vocation and Formation  
Toll free: 866-822-8224 x3841  
Email: [bujnakl@ucc.org](mailto:bujnakl@ucc.org)**

**[www.askthequestion.org](http://www.askthequestion.org)**