

Providential roadblocks: Boundaries in pleasant places

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

Every time I happen upon Psalm 16:6, “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places,” I think about how any of us comes to be who we are. Some of us in ministry can name the incident or date when we encountered a call to this vocation, but for most of us, I think, the call is a process, not an event. For some of us, the process isn’t smooth and straight, but is a journey full of potholes and icy mountain slopes, twists and turns and detours. And for some of us the process continues as we find ourselves deciding over and over again to be who we have become.

So I read Lillian Daniel’s “Call waiting,” in this issue (p. 30), with great interest. It made me recall my experience standing before my presbytery, trying to come up with an appropriate answer to the question of why I wanted to go to divinity school. The truth was, I wasn’t entirely sure that I did. I wasn’t sure about much of anything. I was fortunate enough to have a college adviser who recommended that I take a year or so of graduate study at a place that would help me make a decision, would not apply pressure and would give me the opportunity to pursue some of the matters in which I was interested. He pointed me toward a university divinity school. My presbytery approved, in spite of my rambling rationale. I recall that it was snowing that afternoon and everybody wanted to go home. It was an act of prevenient grace if there ever was one.

Lillian Daniel recalls a discernment committee’s judgment that she had “no discernable gifts for ordained ministry.” It was that difficult experience—she describes it with a light grace that disguises what had to be a painful moment—that set her on another, complicated path toward ordination.

Near the end of the first year of divinity school I started thinking that I needed to do something else. Among other considerations was the fact that we had a baby, so the long-term economic prospects of this ministry venture were not exactly promising. So I applied for a graduate program in educational administration at a university in the East. The admissions director interviewed me in the passenger lounge at Midway Airport. The interview went all right, I thought, although my mind wandered and I found myself watching airplanes take off and land.

It never occurred to me that I might not be accepted into the program. When the letter arrived, it announced that the admissions committee had turned down my application. It thanked me for my interest and wished me well. There was a handwritten note at the bottom of the page from the director: "Dear Mr. Buchanan: I've interviewed a lot of people and it was clear to me that you are not really interested in a career as an education administrator. Maybe you are where you are supposed to be. Good luck."

Most people have a story like that, a story of how a no became a yes, of a door closing and another one opening. I'm grateful to Lillian Daniel for telling hers, and grateful to that admissions director who helped me on the way to becoming who I am. "The boundary lines have fallen in pleasant places."