

Answering yes

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 22, 2012](#) issue



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As I approached the date for my retirement from pastoral ministry, the question of vocation kept coming up. People wanted to know how my journey had begun. I confess that I've had a lifelong aversion to declaring that God had called me to be a minister. People assume that there must have been a voice in the middle of the night or a startling vision—something like what happened to Martin Luther, who was caught in a ferocious storm and promised God that if he survived he would enter a monastery.

I ended up attending divinity school because I wanted to pursue questions I had about God and the meaning of life. I had no intention of seeking ordination.

Leslie Van Dine, the pastor of my home church, heard what I was up to. "I know you don't want to be a minister, but on the remote chance that you might someday change your mind, I think you ought to come under care of the presbytery." That sounded like a slippery slope to me, but he assured me that it was no big deal. I liked and respected Van Dine. He was a World War II vet who ruffled feathers by preaching that Christianity has something to do with politics, economics and social justice.

So I put on my only suit and tie and drove to a Presbyterian church in Snow Shoe, Pennsylvania, and stood up in front of a group of men in suits and ties. I was terrified. Sure enough, the first question was "John, do you, as far as you know in

your own heart, believe yourself to be called to the office of Christian ministry?" Van Dine had warned me. "I can't say that," I'd told him. He advised me, "Pay attention to the phrase, 'as far as you know in your own heart.' There's a lot of latitude there." For some reason, I answered yes.

As I suspect is true of incidents in the Bible, what actually happened becomes a lot clearer in retrospect. One of the best ideas in our tradition is that God calls a woman or a man not just to a clergy or religious vocation, but to become all she or he was created to become. One of the worst ideas is that only clergy are called and that everybody else is left to his or her own devices. Luther said that no one profession is dearer to God than any other and that each of us is called to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.

God calls us to follow, to be faithful, to live life to its fullest, to love God and neighbor and to give our lives away not just once but every day. God calls through the voices of friends, colleagues, spouses, partners, our children, politicians, the hungry and the marginalized. Sometimes the call comes in an invitation to attend a meeting in Snow Shoe, Pennsylvania.