

Call: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “call.”

Readers Write in the [May 8, 2019](#) issue



Photo by Quino Al

*In response to our request for essays on call, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **lapse and feet**—[read more](#).*

My first inkling of call came when I was 12 years old. Initially, I didn't tell many people about it. The one friend who I told assured me that being a minister would make me “weird.” The call didn't go away, no matter how much I bargained with it. At age 25, I stood in the pulpit in front of my first congregation.

Two weeks after I arrived, a beloved elderly member of the congregation died. After I officiated the funeral, her daughter gave me a gold and ivory cross that had belonged to her mother. In accepting that cross, I knew I was exactly where I was

supposed to be. I was called, and I had answered that call.

I wore that gold and ivory cross at the dozens of funerals I officiated as a pastor and also at many Sunday services, baptisms, and weddings. It hung in my study in each of the three churches I served while I met with parishioners, prepared for Bible studies, and led confirmation classes. My daily work was occasionally tedious and sometimes stressful, but an abiding sense of peace always accompanied the challenges. I did not doubt that I would live out my calling to the end of my days or mandatory retirement, whichever came first.

So it surprised me when, after more than 15 years of ministry, I began to question my call. One afternoon as I listened to a phone message, a phrase came into my consciousness, unbidden and unexpected: "This is not who I am anymore." Just like my first call, it didn't go away.

Is it possible to have two calls in one life? Could it be that God once called me to ministry and now is calling me away from it? Why would God want me to leave a ministry that I love and that is thriving? These questions challenged everything I thought I knew about call. I quietly struggled for two years as I served communion, counseled parishioners, and attended committee meetings. The sense of peace I'd always found in these activities began to fade.

Then, one ordinary fall morning, John Wesley's words from his Covenant Prayer came alive to me in a new way. "I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside by thee." If I believed the "employed by thee" part, I also needed to follow the "laid aside by thee" part.

Last January, in my 18th year of ministry, I told my parishioners that in a few months I would leave them to do something else, something yet to be discovered. In June I said good-bye to the congregation I'd served for nine years. The clergy session that had once approved my ordination approved my application for a leave of absence. I packed the gold and ivory cross in a box that now sits in my basement.

This isn't what I had planned for my life, but neither was ministry. Now I wait for my next call. And I feel at peace.

Kristabeth Atwood
Burlington, Vermont

I handed Nathaniel to my friend that day in weakness. Three years before, my womb had produced this squirmy, eager, sunshine boy. Now it likely carried a child with a hole in his heart, stunted limbs, and Downs.

As Nathaniel chirped about seeing otters, piranhas, and armadillos at the zoo with my friend, I slumped under the sonographer's prognosis for cases such as mine. Surrender to your choice, he said: abortion or divorce. Had my husband's hand not guided me from the examining room, it would have smashed the doctor's jaw.

From the sonographer's office, my husband and I hurried to my obstetrician, Dr. Rossi, for comfort and advice. He saw us immediately, withdrew a spoonful of amniotic fluid for testing, and promised speedy results. Then he gently took my hand and said, "I don't know what will happen. But I tell you this: it will be all right."

I did not believe him. Abortion or divorce. Trapped within that framing, I collapsed and yielded to the colossal hopelessness.

But then there was my friend, telling me about his brother Larry, his family's delight, brain damaged at birth. Then the pile-driving chant at church—we never chant at church—repeating relentlessly, "Thy will be done." Then my husband saying: you choose, but whatever you choose, I choose you. Then to the public library, looking up resources for Downs families.

And then the realization that I could do this, that we could do this, that this in fact was my purpose in life.

At last. This baby was a gift so that I could be a gift. My wide-shouldered blazers suddenly felt too small for this person I was becoming and for the person I carried. Radiant with purpose, fueled by life with meaning, I awaited our baby's birth.

Then Dr. Rossi called with news: you carry a healthy baby boy. I crumpled. How now to give my life?

Carol Ann Siciliano
Falls Church, Virginia

A Friday night. At church. Kneeling at the altar and praying with the emotional intensity often found in adolescents in a church youth group. I recall the tears rolling down my cheeks as I tried to put myself into the hands of God. Later I sat alone in the church basement, feeling the afterglow of that praying. I decided to open the Bible (*Good News for Modern Man*) to a random page, believing God would speak to me through whatever words I found. I opened to Acts 6. The second verse reads, "It is not right for us to neglect the preaching of God's word." My mind raced. Was God calling me to preach?

The following Sunday morning, I debated whether to walk the aisle and, as Baptists called it, "give my life to full-time Christian ministry." The congregation sang. I prayed, asking God for a sign. Then the person next to me dropped a hymnal. It was enough for me. I walked the aisle and announced my yes to a call to ministry from God.

Six months later I began classes at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In no time, I was enthralled. From early church history to the evolution of the biblical canon, I was fascinated by all I was learning.

But as a child I'd been taught, or at least inferred, three convictions about being called to ministry. First, God—and God alone—does the calling. Second, God usually calls folks against their wishes. Third, a person should not enter the ministry because it's something they want to do.

As I studied, I realized how much I wanted to be a minister. I also started to wonder if my sense of call was valid. Was it just an excuse to pursue something I enjoyed? I questioned the idea of God opening the Bible to a specific page or knocking a hymnal out of someone's hand to get my attention.

Face to face with the fear that my calling might not be truly from God, I found myself walking around campus late one evening. Crying. Praying. Wandering. Wondering. Confessing to God that I was there because of my own desire as much as any divine calling. Well over an hour later, I decided to leave seminary.

Thank God for a wise church history professor who I sought out the next day. He acknowledged that God might throw a lasso around folks and drag them against their wishes until they "surrendered to the call to ministry." But he also suggested that God could instill in one's heart the longing, the desire to do ministry. That Psalm 37:4 ("Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart")

might mean that God gives us what we desire, but it could just as easily mean that the desires themselves are God-given. Thanks to his words, I stayed in seminary.

My yes to that calling at age 21 led me to nearly 40 years as a hospital chaplain—and to an enduring resonance with Frederick Buechner’s words: “The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deepest hunger meet.”

Bob G. Cunningham
Louisville, Kentucky

At first, I thought it was a call to the ministry. I even went to a nearby seminary and filled out the application. But that wasn’t it. It was a call to do three things: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). I was 85 years old before I realized that Jesus meant every day.

I’d joined a group that committed to reading the Bible all the way through. I decided to use Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, which asks “that you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence—and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.” When I read that interpretation, the familiar message rang differently. Even when I went back to my old version, the words shouted out: that’s a call to you, Ann, and it means every day.

Now? At 85? I thought about it. I wrote about it. I prayed silently about it. The word never faltered. But how would I do it? I began taking daily notes in my journal.

Call to love God—gave thanks for the cooler weather, the walk outside, and all the places in the day where God’s presence felt real. Call to love neighbor—chatted with a friend who lives across the country; wrote a letter to my youngest grandchild, colored a picture for her, and sent her a blank picture for her to color and send back; mailed a sympathy card to my new Muslim acquaintance whose wife died a month ago. Call to love self—ate well today, did my yoga and my slow walking.

It’s true, I am called.

Ann Freeman Price
Newton, New Jersey

I did not know I was being wooed. Yes, I kept my weekly appointment with the people of God, dressed like a boy on a first date, until I went off to college, yet no ethereal, sun-shot clouds by day or pillar of fire by night—only the Word, week by week.

I also did not know I was being marked, branded. What I would later come to call the Exquisite Voice was faithfully attending me with an invisible stylus in a steady hand, gently chasing my flesh with indelible names—Bread, Vine, Seed, Shepherd, Fountain. Then one Sunday morning the Word flared up, became flesh in a United Methodist clergyman named Daniel Stone.

Think of a good-humored, hopeful, fuller-faced Vincent van Gogh. While serving as our pastor, Dan was also an active duty Navy chaplain. This was 1968, so the tide of support among the American people was beginning to erode for the Vietnam War as more and more young men returned in metal caskets and unthinkable incidents like My Lai captured headlines.

With our church standing just 500 yards from the gates to Naval Air Station Patuxent River in St. Mary's County, Maryland, probably a third of the members were active military, and the town depended on the navy base to survive. Everyone I knew went out of their way to do their patriotic duty, keeping any discomfort they might feel to themselves. Yet this one Sunday morning, Pastor Dan, quoting the prophets and Jesus, spoke about how his mind had changed, and he could no longer in good conscience support the war effort. He then he raised his hand, as if petitioning some presence high above us to call on him. The sleeve of his robe slipped down his arm, revealing a POW bracelet, a slender piece of stainless steel engraved with the name of a young soldier and the place and date he was declared missing in action.

I can't tell you when the road to Jericho became my road and I found myself checking its ditches for hurt souls. I can't tell you when I felt I would do anything in my power to protect the woman taken in adultery, or to spend as much time as necessary with the woman at the well until she got her life-saving drink. I can't name the time or season when I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life helping Zacchaeus get down from his tree or Matthew get free from his ledgers or being a witness to Lazarus cheating death. But I can point to that one Sunday morning when

a weight of holy desire pressed upon my chest, as I saw one man walk into the furnace of the gospel, unafraid.

A tremble came to Dan's voice and tears trailed down his face. As I watched this man burn without being consumed, a surprise of gladness leapt through my flesh, setting free my own voice: I want someday to stand on the holy ground where this man stands; have sacred coals placed on my tongue, words won from the deep down places in the human soul where such integrity, such courage, beauty, and power are kept safe from despair.

Rodolph Rowe

Seattle, Washington

I stood at the counter in my kitchen, my hands kneading the bread dough into loaves. I was trying to make ends meet as a baker and, alone at home, my spirit was heavy with thoughts of war. The aerial bombing of Iraq had started in the middle of January and, with two young daughters asking questions about bombs and guns, life was sobering. My ten-year-old and I, at her request, had marched in the icy cold night, candles in our hands, silently praying for peace alongside others in our small community.

Then the call came. I knew it might come, and I was ready. It was mid-evening when the phone rang. I answered, "Hello?" My brother's voice answered in French: "Bonsoir. I'm calling to let you know that I am coming home to tell Mother and Dad my news."

Immediately, I knew what the call was about. I had been guessing for a while about my brother's sexual orientation. Now I felt overwhelming relief to know that my intuition was right. I stopped him: "I know why you're calling. I somehow already knew." He replied, "That's why I am calling you. You're the first in the family to know. I had an inkling you would know."

I asked a few questions, told him I loved him, and expected the conversation to end. I was feeling exhilarated with this new certainty and wanted to share it with my husband. Then my brother paused and said, "I have one thing to ask of you. Please do not share this news with anyone else in the family. I'll be coming to tell Mother and Dad personally." And so I promised.

I am a truth teller. I have a hard time being dishonest, whether by omission or blatantly. When I told my parents that my brother had called and that he was coming to see them in the next couple of weeks, I could not answer their questions. I fudged answers as well as I could. His truth to tell became my truth to hold. I tried to hold the truth in limbo . . . and it nearly destroyed me. I knew I would never again hold his truth for him, or for anyone else.

*Rachel Shenk
Goshen, Indiana*

It was physics that first diverted us toward our callings. I was a sophomore in college, taking my first physics course. Jack was the lab assistant who was overseeing our laboratory experiments.

We became friends, perhaps because we were both struggling to sort out our future plans. We each believed that our Christian vocation would be shaped by the will and purpose of God, although it was not at all clear to either of us how this lofty and pious goal could be attained. As the school year progressed, it was becoming clearer to me that physics and calculus were not the classes upon which my future would be based.

I was surprised to learn that Jack was a full-time seminary student. He had majored in physics in college and had considered going straight into graduate school. However, he'd felt that God was calling him to be a pastor and had entered theological studies. He'd taken the job in the physics lab to cover some of his living expenses.

As the year progressed, Jack and I each became aware of a new vision. For me, it was theological studies and a call to pastoral ministry. For Jack, it was a return to his first love, physics. Neither of these visions burst upon us in full-blown form. But among the test tubes and Bunsen burners, we were able to share our hopes and our fears, our ambitions and our motivations, in a remarkable dialogue.

The sharing of our fragmentary longings and vocational aspirations gradually morphed into a clear professional path for each of us. By the end of the course, we had each made an important shift: I was headed for seminary; Jack was going to graduate school in physics. A life of pastoral ministry lay ahead of me; Jack would go

on to have a significant career as a college professor.

Although it didn't seem like it at the time, in retrospect it's clear: that physics lab was a holy place. There God brought us together, nudged us, cajoled us, and eventually allowed each of us to respond according to the gifts we'd been given.

Albert Swingle
Washington, D.C.

From Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation*:

“There are some things I would be willing to bet maybe even my life on. That life is grace, for instance—the givenness of it, the fathomlessness of it, the endless possibilities of its becoming transparent to something extraordinary beyond itself. That—as I picked up somewhere in Jung and whittled into the ash stick I use for tramping around through the woods sometimes—*vocatus atque non vocatus Deus aderit*, which I take to mean that in the long run, whether you call on him or don't call on him, God will be present with you. That if we really had our eyes open, we would see that all moments are key moments.”

When I first considered going into ministry, I had to learn a new vocabulary. I began to talk about *discernment* rather than *deciding*, *vocation* instead of *career*. No one *chooses* to go into ministry, I was told. I adjusted my language and soon found comfort in the idea of being *called* by God.

As a minister, I embraced a broad view of calling. Doctors are called and plumbers are called. Waitresses are called and teachers are called. (I'm certainly not called to teach science to middle schoolers—that's a call for someone else.)

After giving birth to my first child, I began to sense a shift in my call. I was still called to be a minister, but I felt God had also ordained me to take care of this tiny being. After giving birth to my second child, I realized the depth of that call. I felt equipped with milk and love and patience. I was given gifts of the Spirit (like gentleness) and

gifts of the baby shower (like diapers). I sensed that I'd been placed in those special moments for just such a time as this.

Then I learned that I'm the parent of a child with autism. I felt incredibly ill-equipped when I found out. The milk dried up. Not that it would have made a difference or changed the diagnosis. My patience waned. The love remained, but I wondered what happened to my calling.

It's still there, but I can see it shifting over time. Now I'm equipped with visual schedules and compressions and headphones. The village that's helping raise my child includes occupational therapists, speech therapists, and more. Just as pastors work with elders and laity so they don't have to do it all alone, I've learned to seek help from community.

Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Hanover, Indiana

Confession: as a 78-year-old retired clergywoman, I am confused about God's call. I'm even confused about God. Although I assume there is a sacred prompt of some sort in the minutiae of my daily life and struggle to discern it, I'm rarely certain my decisions are in accord with any cosmic plan.

When I first entered seminary, I learned that I would be required several times to articulate God's call in my life. I was 42 years old with decades of church involvement and experience. Younger classmates readily described their call, but I was embarrassed at being unclear about any specific holy promptings.

"I want to be near holy things," I would mumble to friends when they questioned my pursuit of an MDiv. Confused about God's call, I interpreted "holy things" as the baptismal water and the elements of communion, the materials of ritual acts reserved for clergy. I didn't include my desire to be near holy things in the papers I wrote at seminary, but the judicatory leaders must have seen God's call toward ordained ministry in the experiences I related. I was ordained and served churches in Wisconsin for almost 25 years.

Imagine my surprise as a pastor when I began bumping into moments beyond baptism and communion that held holy things. Many were revealed to me

unexpectedly during ordinary events: a funeral for a stillborn baby, a Christmas program gone awry, an irate parishioner who insisted God was a man and sent a petition to the United Methodist Church to get rid of all women clergy.

Today, I'm still confused about God's call. In the cacophony of internal and external voices, I'm often unsure how to respond. I do believe, however, in the redemptive power of sacrificial love. I'm grateful for that kind of love, which has been shown to me throughout my life by people who may be as perplexed about God and God's call as I am. I'm grateful, I think, for the struggle.

*Nancy Bauer-King
Racine, Wisconsin*

Getting off the freeway at an exit I'd never used in a neighborhood I'd never been in, I wished I could turn around and go home. I was on my way to pick up a woman I had never met and three of her sons. They were from Afghanistan. They were refugees.

The week before, the president had announced a travel ban targeting nations with high populations of Muslims. The images of chaos at airports around the world had filled me with despair, outrage, and a sense of helplessness.

I remembered that I'd heard about an organization two women had founded to support refugees in our community. I found their organization's page on Facebook, tentatively opened Messenger, and typed: "Good morning, I am heartbroken and wondering if there is anything I can do to help (besides write, call, pray, etc.)." I thought it sounded a little naive, but I sent the message anyway.

A few minutes later a woman named Sherry wrote back, asking me to call her. I thought she might ask for money or tell me where to drop off food, clothes, or furniture. Instead, she said, "We have ESL class tomorrow. Can you give a family a ride?" Inwardly, I was hesitant. But I was a graduate student with a writing fellowship, so I had no real time commitments—and I had a car. I said yes.

Soon I got a text message from someone named Ike who coordinates rides to class. He gave me a name, phone number, and address in another city. "I don't want to do this," was my first thought. The same thought ran through my head the next

morning as I drove to the apartment building. But as I pulled up, I was struck with a realization. As hesitant as I was, I had never felt more strongly that I was doing what God wanted me to do.

I drove Shabana and her three sons to my city, to the church where the class was meeting. I followed her in. Folding chairs were arranged in a circle and a few women were already seated, talking and laughing. They each greeted me with three kisses (Afghani style, I soon learned). I took a seat, still feeling like a newcomer observing this growing circle of women and children, warm embraces, friendship, and resilience. I met Shabnam, who had been in the country for just a few weeks, and I practiced writing the alphabet with Roya. I met Friba, who told me about her four daughters and made plans with me for them to visit the art museum.

Later that day, I went to the car wash, physical therapy, and a church meeting and told everyone about my morning. Within a week, my physical therapist had bought shoes for Friba's daughter, my cousin had started providing childcare during class, and Marge, a woman from my church in her eighties, had started coming to class and we were becoming fast friends. This is what we were all supposed to be doing.

Since then, I've grown close to the women and their families. I've become invested in their hopes and their projects. I first reached out because I wanted to make people who were new to this country feel welcome at a time when the government was making it clear that they weren't. As it turned out, they made me feel welcome. I hate the losses my new friends have endured and the hardships their families continue to face. I love the community we've built in the midst of it.

I can still feel the way God moved me on that first morning, making me feel in my bones what I knew in my head—welcome the stranger—and moving me to my core with a conviction: *yes, you!*

Nicolette Rohr
Riverside, California

Some 20 years ago, I left my pastoral position in a large parish in Atlanta feeling totally burned out on church. When I left, I had not received a job offer or contemplated my next move; I just needed out and I resigned. The goodbye reception on my last Sunday was filled with bewildered people fearful for me, my

daughter, and our future. I was not so frightened. I had a strong sense that God would send the next call in due time.

A month later, while sitting at home waiting for the Holy Spirit to move (and resting my brain and my soul), I received a phone call from a longtime clergy colleague who wanted to meet with me. He had founded a nonprofit organization in Atlanta decades before, and that day he told me that his cancer had come back. He wanted me to consider taking over his life's work.

His work was in a field I knew well. After several meetings with him and with each of his board members, I felt it was a call I could accept. The day came when I met with the full board and received their endorsement to name me the president of the nonprofit "when the position became available." I should have gone on the alert when the chairman of the board looked at the high-powered attorney board member who read the motion and its small clause, "if the board agrees at the time," muttering, "I think we are covered." But I was high on doing the right thing for my friend and saying yes to God. When the board voted yes, I immersed myself in the organization.

My friend died two weeks later. Two weeks after that, the board declined to name me president of the organization. They offered to keep me on and encouraged me to stay as vice president. I stayed for 14 miserable months until they "reorganized the organizational chart" and left my name off it.

What does this experience have to do with call? When I took the job after almost 20 years as an ordained minister, I'd had no experience with calls that were not long-term. Every Presbyterian minister I'd known had held a succession of calls lasting many years and then had honorably retired. Who knew that God could call a minister for two weeks?

My call was to help my friend die, and it was over the moment he finished working side by side with me. By agreeing to take his life's work and run with it into the future, I'd made his task of letting go easier.

Cheryl Gosa
Atlanta, Georgia

When I perceived a call to ministry, I was 47 years old and a single parent. My son was 19 and living on his own, and my daughter was a senior in high school. Clearly the time was right for my own transition.

I applied to divinity schools and was accepted at my first choice, in southern New England. Thrilled, I quit my job. I painted a few rooms and put my house up for sale. It sold. My daughter was accepted to college, so we would both leave at the end of summer.

My paperwork for divinity school was incomplete, however. I had not had the physical exam required by the school health plan. In fact, I hadn't had a physical exam in many years. Even so, I waited until practically the last minute.

On the Monday of the last week I would be in town, I finally presented myself to my doctor, who poked and prodded and found a lump in my right breast. She sent me to mammography. A few days later, she called to say she was pretty sure I had breast cancer. Could I come in and see her next week?

Well, as a matter of fact, I could not. I would be leaving town on Saturday. She tried to argue me out of it. But there was no point. I had no job; I had no house; I had no health insurance. The movers were coming the next day to pick up what furniture I was taking with me. I had only my acceptance at divinity school and a call from God. I knew I had to go.

My son offered to drive me across the country. I didn't tell him (or his sister) about my possible diagnosis. The mammograms sat tucked away in the backseat between piles of clothing, bedding, and the cat carrier. We drove for four days.

When we arrived on campus, I picked up the key to my new apartment, moved the stuff and the cat inside, said good-bye to my son as he caught the train home, and experienced such aloneness as I had never known before.

And such a holy presence as I had never known before.

In October, I got the diagnosis. It was cancer.

I said to myself, "I will not let you go until you bless me." I wrestled all my first year: with a lumpectomy, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and the awe and wonder of living with teachers and students who took their minds as seriously as they took their faith. And the awe and wonder that God had called me—*me!*—into preparing

for ministry.

I survived. I graduated three years later bearing the scars, literally and spiritually, of the call that saved my life.

Judy Schultz

Seattle, Washington

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Call."