

A man in a light-colored suit and a patterned bow tie is looking down at an open book he is holding. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

TOBIN PERRY

**IS GOD
CALLING
YOU?**

*A Step-By-Step Guide to Discerning
God's Mysterious Invitation*

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LIFELONG LEARNING FOR CONTEXTUAL MINISTRY.

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)

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GOD'S MYSTERIOUS INVITATION

As a young farmer stands in his field, he notices an odd cloud formation. The clouds form the letters G, P and C. The farmer takes the appearance of the three letters as a call from God—Go preach Christ!

The farmer rushes to his church's deacons and insists that the Lord has called him to preach. Because they sense the young man's passion, they invite him to fill the pulpit the following week.

But as he preaches the next Sunday, the sermon is long, boring and hard to follow. When the preacher-to-be finishes his sermon, everyone sits in shock. A deacon mutters to the preacher: "Seems to me the clouds were saying, 'Go plant corn.'"

Does that kind of ambiguity seem familiar?

For generations, young potential pastors have been told this story as they consider God's call on their lives. It has been told and retold because just about everyone considering a call to ministry leadership has wrestled with a mysterious invitation from the Creator of the universe.

If that's what you're wrestling with right now, you probably wish God would write out your calling in the clouds, place it in your next fortune cookie or—preferably—audibly communicate it. You're looking for something tangible.

But for most of us, God doesn't work that way. Instead, the Lord leads us step by step in faith. Some days it seems crystal clear what He has made us to do. Other days, we feel like a fish out of water as we flip and flop looking for His unique plan.

God's call is a mystery. In many ways the wrestling you do today with your calling prepares you for a lifetime of walking and ministering in faith. Serving God in ministry leadership isn't easy. You'll likely never get rich. You'll likely never get famous. You'll certainly be criticized. And you'll rarely—if ever—be given a detailed manual of what to do next. But God guides you as you seek to honor Him with your faithful ministry.

While no resource can clarify this mysterious call (and frankly, you wouldn't want such a resource anyway), this ebook will give you the tools to see where God is moving in your life and the confidence to take the needed steps.

What is a calling?

When the Lord calls us to serve Him in a pastoral or leadership role, it's more than just a call to preach, visit sick people and marry and bury.

It's a holy invitation—one that we reject at our own risk.

Both the Hebrew word *qārā* and the Greek word *kaleo*—the two verbs in the Bible typically translated as call when referring to God calling people into His service—carry the meaning of a summons or an invitation. When the Lord calls people in the Bible, it’s not a one-way conversation. It’s an invitation to be a part of something special, something unique.

A calling is God’s invitation to join Him in spreading the rule of God in your community and around the world through ministry leadership.

That’s a mouthful. If you read it and you’re intimidated by what the Lord may be doing in your life, you’re in good company. Some of the most famous men and women called by God in the Bible had a similar experience. They felt unworthy. They felt like God must be making a mistake. They were sure God must have had someone else in mind.

When God invited Moses to lead His people out of captivity, Moses reminded God that he stuttered. Gideon told God he was from the wrong side of the tracks. Isaiah thought he was too sinful. Matthew had the wrong job.

Eventually, though, each accepted God’s invitation.

And the Lord used them in great ways.

How about you? What is the Lord inviting you to do?

CONSIDER...

- What words and phrases come to your mind when you consider the word calling?
- Read the stories of God’s calling of Moses (Exodus 3:1-4:17), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), Gideon (Judges 5:11-24), and Matthew (Luke 5:27-32). Pay special attention to the excuses they use (or other people use concerning them) when the Lord calls them. Look at your life. What excuses do you consider using when thinking about the call of God on your life?

PRAY...

- Thank God for the opportunity to discover what He has made you to do.
- Ask God to guide you as you begin to ask tough questions about the call of God on your life.

SETTLING YOUR CALL

In his short three decades of life, David Brainerd never knew an easy path of ministry. Tossed out of Yale in 1741 for careless words he uttered about one of the school's tutors, he seemingly had forfeited his calling to pastor a church. God then began to speak to Brainerd through his broken heart. The following year God called him to become a missionary to a Native American tribe in Massachusetts. It was a tough assignment, and throughout his short ministry Brainerd battled depression and a variety of physical ailments. Still, he persevered.

In 1744, a church in a prosperous parish near Brainerd's hometown called the young preacher to become its next pastor. Just a few years earlier, he had assumed he'd never get an opportunity to pastor a church. Yet Brainerd already had a calling—and it was a settled one. God had called him to preach the gospel among Native Americans. And he wasn't going anywhere else.

He wrote: "Resolved to go on still with the Indian affair, if divine providence permitted; although before felt some inclination to go to East Hampton, where I was solicited to go."

Ministry leadership is never easy. You aren't David Brainerd. You may not battle debilitating pain or oppressive depression. You may never get that tempting dream job offer.

But the moment you sign on to engage your community with the gospel, you have an enemy. And Satan will do whatever it takes to tear you down and step all over your ministry.

He wants to make you quit.

That's why you need to settle your calling. You need to know, without a shadow of a doubt, that Jesus wants you to serve Him through ministry leadership. Satan will go after any weakness you have. If you're not sure about your calling, he'll pound away at it relentlessly. He will specifically target your toughest times in ministry—when you're criticized, when you have family troubles, when you're having money problems, etc. He'll convince you that you were made to do something else.

There's no shame in the Lord guiding you away from ministry leadership. The church needs committed, faithful Christians to serve in a variety of ways—not just as pastors and missionaries. As you explore how God wants you to serve Him, stay open to whatever He shows you.

But if you're going to lead others in serving Jesus, strive to know for certain that's what He wants you to do. It's not just because you'll need to know to endure tough waters in ministry. Jeff Iorg, president of Gateway Seminary, refers to a minister's call as "foundational to effective Christian leadership." Why? We respond to God's initiative to serve in ministry—not our own.

"Ministry leadership is a calling we answer, not a career we pursue," Iorg writes.

You may have all the necessary gifts to be a dynamic pastor. You may be an eloquent and

convicting preacher, a passionate shepherd, a desperate soul-winner, a charismatic people person. You may have a degree from the world's leading theological institution. You may have 100 people telling you that you should become a pastor.

But you'd be missing the one indispensable qualification to be in ministry leadership. God's call.

John Newton, the author of probably the most famous song in church history—*Amazing Grace*—puts it like this, “None but he who made the world can make a minister of the gospel.”

Has He made you a minister of the gospel?

CONSIDER...

- What lingering doubts do you have about God's invitation into ministry leadership? Find someone you can trust with whom you can talk through those doubts.
- Read through the list of biblical qualifications for pastoral ministry in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. Go through each of the qualifications individually and be ruthlessly honest with yourself about whether you meet them. Ask people who care about you and care about the church to evaluate you on these character traits.

PRAY...

- Ask God to give you clarity in His invitation to serve Him in ministry leadership.

DISCERNING YOUR CALL

You have an invitation. You have a call. If you are a Jesus-follower, it's not up for debate. The question before you right now isn't, "Has God called me to serve Him?" The question before you is, "How has God called me to serve Him?"

Again, it's not an easy question. But no matter how God leads you to answer this question, you have a part to play—a part you must play—in what He is doing in the world.

This ebook is designed to help those who are considering a call to some form of ministry leadership. Every person who embraces ministry leadership will wrestle with three different calls:

1. A general call to serve Jesus: God calls every Jesus-follower to serve Him in ministry—no exceptions. The New Testament's word for church (ekklesia) literally means "the called out ones." By its very definition the church is simply a collection of people called by God to do His work in the world. Charles Spurgeon wrote, "The propagation of the gospel is left, not to a few, but to all the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ: according to the measure of grace entrusted to him by the Holy Spirit, each man is bound to minister in his day and generation, both to the church and among unbelievers."

God may or may not call you into ministry leadership, but He has a place for you to serve within the body of Christ. You're needed whether your gift is in administration, encouragement, discernment or teaching. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12 that every gift is critical for the work of the Church. Whether we're an eye, a mouth or a hand, we're all a part of the body—and it's critically important that we play our part in His work. We may have varying levels of responsibility, but there are no second-class roles for any Jesus-follower.

2. A specific call to ministry leadership: Though all roles within the church—whether paid or not—are of equal value to God, He clearly issues a specific invitation to ministry leaders. This call to ministry leadership flows from our response to God's general call. The Bible gives both specific character requirements for ministry leaders (see 1 Timothy 3) and specific warnings when they lead people astray (see Galatians 1:7-8).

God's call to ministry leadership isn't necessarily a call to a full-time, paid church position. It's

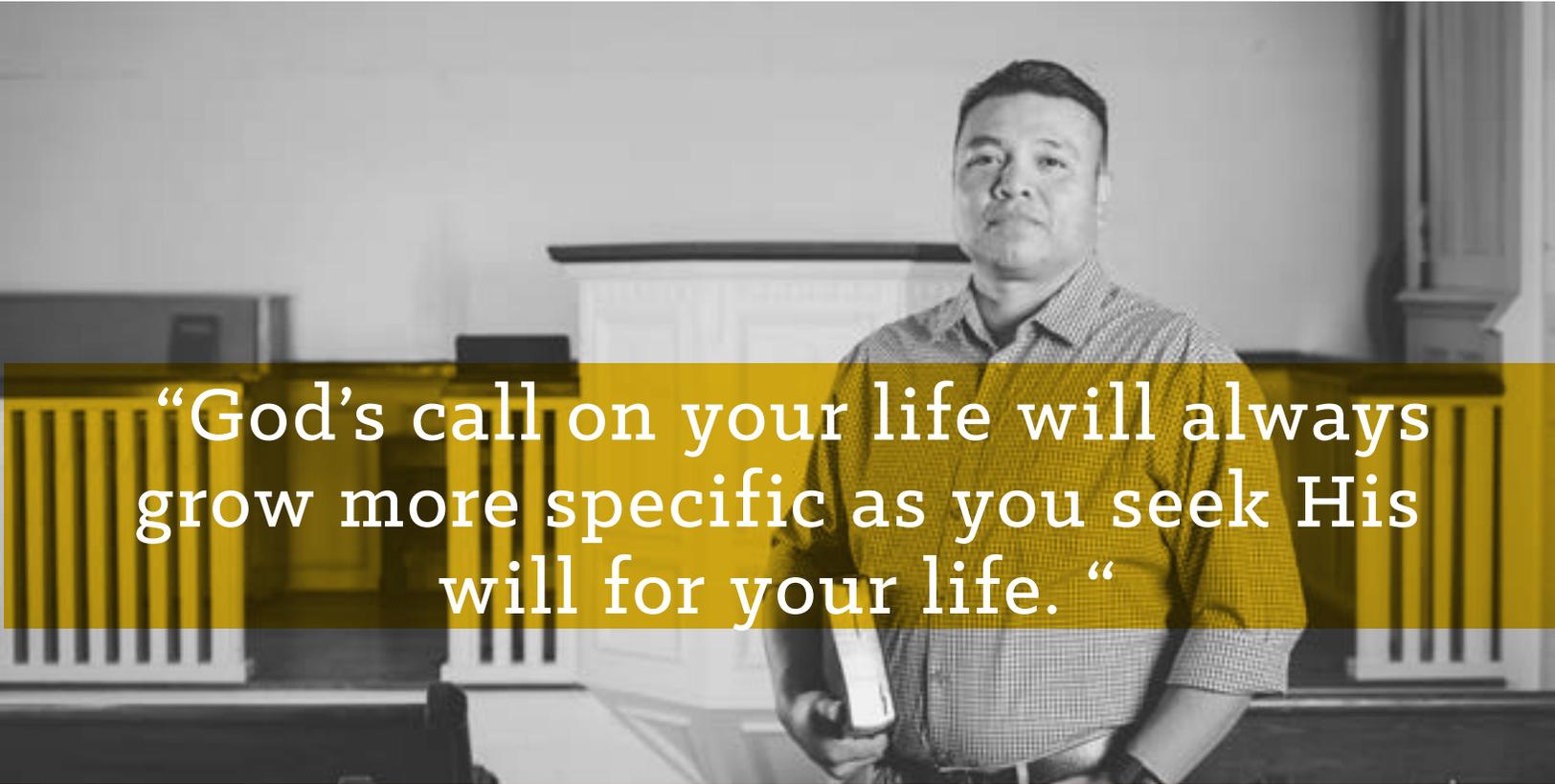
not necessarily a call to preach. It's a call to shepherd God's people—in all the myriad of forms this takes in the 21st-century world. It's a call to lead people in advancing God's kingdom in your community and around the world.

3. A call to a particular ministry assignment: But God gets even more specific with our call to serve Him in ministry leadership. Jeff Iorg notes, “In the Bible, God always called people to someone, something, or somewhere.” God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity. He called Jonah to preach in Nineveh. He called Paul to reach the gentiles.

God's call on your life will always grow more specific as you seek His will for your life. God doesn't just communicate what He wants you to do. He communicates where He wants you to do it (and sometimes whom He wants you to reach).

Sometimes that call gets very precise, indeed. Take, for example, God's direction of Paul in Acts 16. God had already called Paul to take the gospel to the gentiles as part of his conversion in Acts 9. But in the midst of Paul's missionary journeys, the Bible tells us that the “Spirit of Jesus” prevented the apostle from sharing the gospel in Asia (16:6) and Bithynia. Eventually, the Lord led Paul to Macedonia, where he had one of his most significant church-planting experiences in Philippi.

Your call may or may not be as dramatic as Paul's. But every person whom God calls into ministry leadership will be called to a specific place of service at least once. You will likely be called to several ministry locations and ministry roles throughout your lifetime. You may be



“God's call on your life will always grow more specific as you seek His will for your life.”

tempted to think that if you've settled the issue of your general call to ministry leadership, you can simply treat your call to a specific place of service as a job change. But ministry leadership is no ordinary career path.

Jeff Iorg: "A clear sense of call is necessary for anyone who assumes a ministry-leadership position in a church or Christian organization." You can expect God to impress His will upon you with each new ministry assignment you accept. In fact, we don't move on from any ministry assignment until God impresses upon us to go somewhere else.

CONSIDER...

- Think back to your own journey through these different kinds of calls. Which one are you currently wrestling through? What have you already learned about your call by serving in ministry at your church?
- Think through God's general call to ministry you've been given. If God is leading you into ministry leadership, what made that call different?
- Take a half day (or a full day if you can do so). Get alone with your Bible and God. Talk to the Lord about what He is doing in your life. Continue to seek clarity on your call to ministry leadership and any particular calls to a place, an activity or a people.

PRAY...

- If, by now, you sense the Lord is calling you into ministry leadership, ask Him about what specifically He may want you to do with this call.

FOUR SIGNPOSTS OF MINISTRY CALL

At the heart of God’s call on your life is a profound mystery—a mysterious invitation, as I wrote in Chapter One. You won’t find a standardized test that will tell you whether you are called. No career counselor can direct you into ministry with 100-percent certainty. A book can’t tell you how He wants you to serve Him.

Only God can do that. But God does give us at least four signposts that can help us discern what He is doing in our lives. If the Lord is calling you into ministry leadership, you can expect to see these signposts manifest themselves in your life:

1. God impresses His call upon your heart. Of these four signposts none is more important—nor more subjective—than the Holy Spirit impressing the call upon your heart. You can have the other three elements in abundance, but if you haven’t experienced this you haven’t been called.

Sometimes this impression comes immediately--often in a moment of crisis. Other times it comes, as Gordon MacDonald describes, in a “continual dripping” until you finally surrender.

It’s hard to describe God’s call, but you know it when you experience it. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Al Mohler describes it this way: “Those whom God has called know this call by a sense of leading, purpose, and growing commitment.”

2. You desire to do the work of ministry. Spurgeon calls this “an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work [of ministry].” You shouldn’t pursue ministry out of reluctance. You don’t do it because you think God “needs” you to serve. You accept a call to ministry leadership because there’s literally nothing else you can do with your life that would satisfy you.

Many would-be pastors wrestle with whether they should desire to become a pastor. They wonder whether desiring to serve in ministry leadership is simply arrogance. Paul squelches this concern in 1 Timothy 3:1: “This saying is trustworthy, ‘If anyone aspires to be an overseer (a pastor), he desires a noble work.’”

Before Paul goes on to describe the biblical requirements for the role of a pastor, he tells us the work of ministry is noble work. Desiring that God use you in this work isn’t a mark

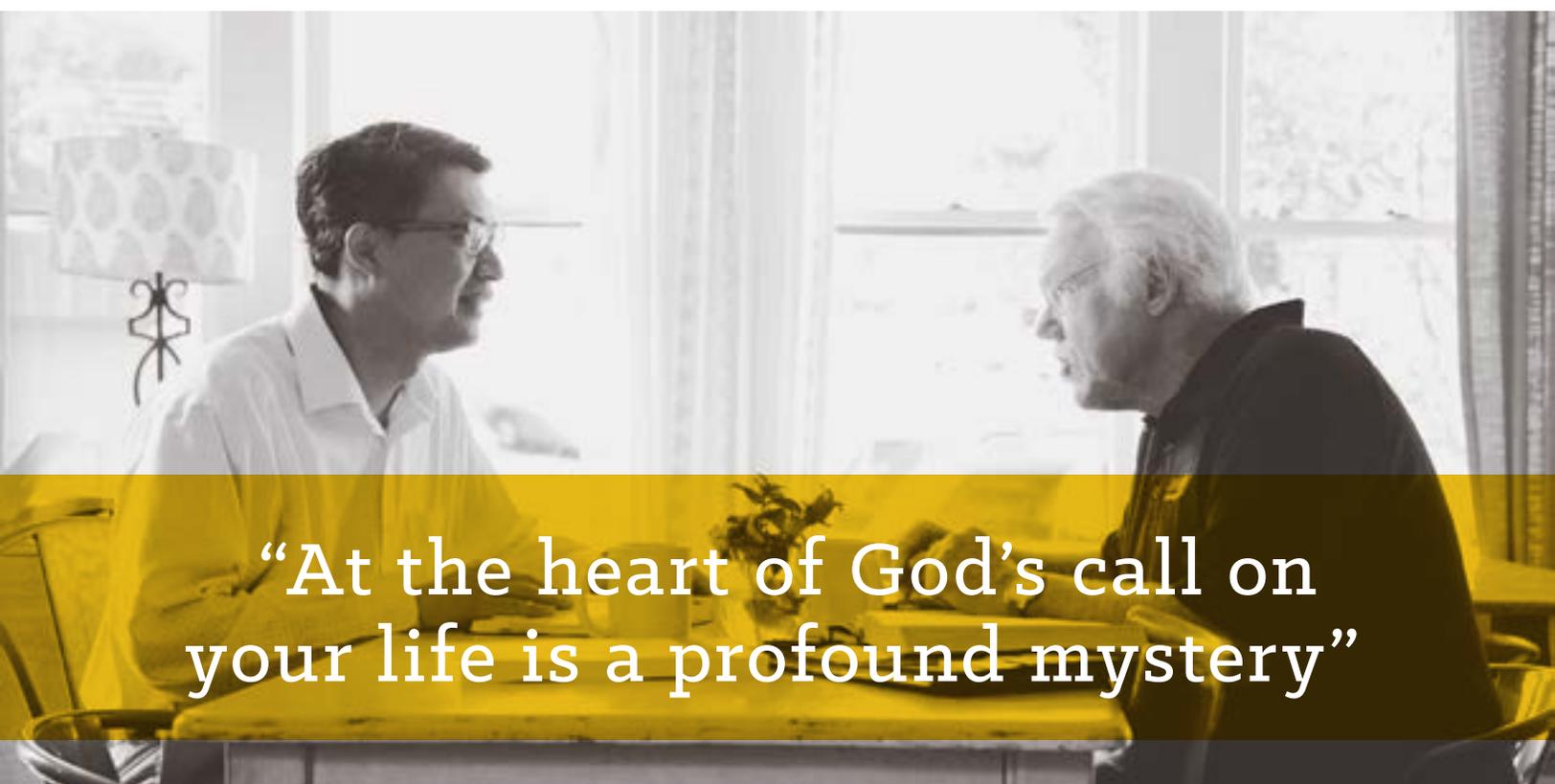
of arrogance—it’s a prerequisite for the job. If you don’t want to serve in ministry leadership, don’t do it.

3. You’re fruitful in gospel work. This third signpost isn’t easy to quantify—and it should never be relegated to mere numbers. Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Jason Allen writes, “To the extent that we see God changing lives through our ministry, we can gain assurance He has indeed set us apart to it. The point is not so much how many lives have been changed, but if lives have been changed.”

Not all of our ministry contexts are the same. Some of us are in the midst of incredibly fertile gospel soil; others find themselves in places where it takes years for truth to take root. Certainly, church history has given us numerous examples of missionaries and other ministry leaders who have labored faithfully for decades with few conversions.

This signpost assumes you’re involved in local church ministry, which should be a prerequisite for responding to any call to ministry leadership. Since you should see gospel fruitfulness and have a desire for the work, you need to participate in ministry as you discern your call.

4. Your church family confirms your call to ministry. God will never call you to ministry leadership in isolation. Your church should be a part of the process. You can see the critical part played by the church in 1 Timothy 1:5-6 and 4:14. In both cases Paul reminds Timothy of the congregation laying hands on him as an affirmation of his calling. It’s a simple reminder that Timothy’s calling to ministry came in the midst of his church family.



“At the heart of God’s call on your life is a profound mystery”

If you believe the Lord is calling you into ministry, talk to your pastor. Lean on his wisdom concerning this journey. Remember, he has been through this process in his own life. Ask him whether he sees ministry leadership gifts present in your life. Talk to other church leaders as well. See if they believe ministry is a good fit for you.

Al Mohler writes, “As a family of faith, the congregation should recognize and celebrate the gifts of ministry given to its members, and take responsibility to encourage those whom God has called to respond to that call with joy and submission.”

Realize that every church affirms a ministry call differently. Depending upon how long you’ve been at the church and how familiar the church is with your gifting, the pastor and other church leaders may want to see you serve for a period of time before affirming your call in any official manner. Be patient with the process—and take advantage of it at the same time. Use the time to discover more about how God wants to use you.

CONSIDER...

- As you think about these four signposts, which gives you the most reason for pause as you consider your call? Why?

PRAY...

- Ask the Lord to help you understand how these four signposts relate to your call. If one of the signposts is weak, ask God if that should be a reason for you to pause in this journey.

NO SECOND-CLASS MINISTER

It's tempting to look at a call to ministry as a seismic event that will uproot everything in your life. It's tempting because it's true. When the Lord calls us to serve Him through ministry leadership, it's a big deal. It leaves very little in your life untouched.

At least two areas of your life won't necessarily be uprooted, however: your vocation and your location. Sure, if God calls you to serve as a missionary in a faraway place, you'll likely change both. If you live in Oklahoma and God calls you to serve Him as a church planter in Boston, it's time to pack some boxes.

But that's not everyone. Many people called by God find opportunities to serve Him within their current contexts. Tens of thousands of ministry leaders will support themselves this week with non-ministry work. They'll work full-time jobs as doctors, janitors, engineers or teachers. Then they will serve and disciple God's people during nights and weekends.

Take Everardo Borunda, for example.

Growing up in the church, Mexico-born Everardo had a nagging fear God would call him into ministry. He saw the problems ministry caused for pastors and their families and he wanted no part of it. Every time the thought crept into his mind, he buried it.

It wasn't until Everardo married and began working as an electrician that he could no longer turn his back on the call of God.

"I knew God wanted me for something else," Everardo says. "It wasn't just to be a Christian and to be serving in a Sunday School class. He was calling me to do more."

Everardo then talked to his pastor, who encouraged and guided him as he prayed about what God was asking him to do. At 29 years old, he felt God begin to nudge him toward planting a church in Oklahoma City.

Everardo didn't give up his day job as he became the Hispanic pastor at Rancho Village Baptist Church and started a congregation for local Spanish speakers. At first, being bi-vocational bugged him. As the new ministry began, he looked forward to a day when he could devote all of his time to the church.

But that day has yet to come. Today, Everardo sees service as a bi-vocational minister as an opportunity that expands the Lord's call rather than competing with it.

"Bi-vocational ministry is a valid calling," Everardo says. "I think the Lord calls some of us

to do it without any expectation that it will turn into something else.”

The North American Mission Board estimates there are more than 260 million spiritually lost people in North America. Jesus tells us clearly that the “harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” We’ll never reach that many people by mobilizing only full-time pastors and church leaders. We need to mobilize engineers, mechanics and electricians to start churches and lead ministries for the glory of God. We need to mobilize people like Everardo.

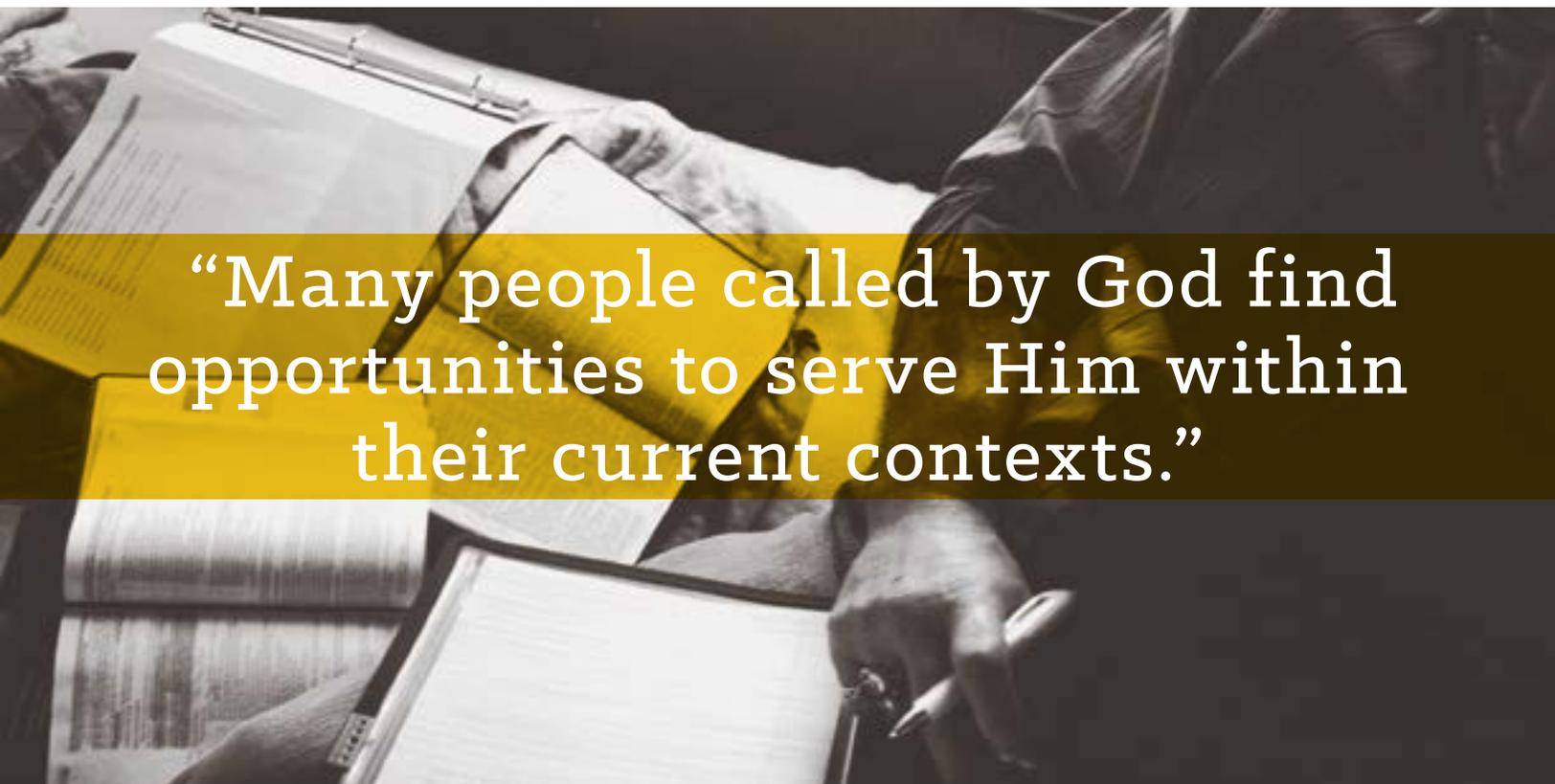
Could you be one?

CONSIDER...

- Think about your current vocation (or the future vocation for which you’ve been studying). Do you think God could use your participation in that vocation as you serve Him in ministry?
- What concerns would you have about serving in a bi-vocational capacity? Spend some time talking through your concerns with a bi-vocational ministry leader.

PRAY...

- Remembering there is no right or wrong answer to the question of bi-vocational ministry, ask the Lord to open up your heart to what He wants on the topic.



“Many people called by God find opportunities to serve Him within their current contexts.”

WHAT'S NEXT?

Discovering that God has invited you to serve Him in ministry leadership isn't the end of your journey. It's the beginning. A call to serve is a call to a lifetime of continual learning and growth.

A few years ago, I saw a commercial that I'll never forget. It went something like this: A football coach lectures his team passionately at halftime. He points out every possible flaw in the team's game. You're left to assume that the team is down by a large margin.

Then one player raises his hand. "Coach, aren't we up 72-0?" he asks.

The coach responds: "The day we're satisfied with where we are is the day we're through as a football team."

That's true for disciples of Jesus, too. It's particularly true for those called to lead others in the church. The day you stop growing as a ministry leader is the day you're going backwards.

Here are five commitments you can make today that will set you up for a lifetime of growth in ministry leadership:

5. Pursue Jesus daily. As a ministry leader, your first and most important responsibility is as a disciple of Jesus. Make sure you spend time in God's Word and in prayer on a daily basis.
6. Find a mentor. Ask a ministry leader you trust to be a guide for you in this journey. Look for someone who can challenge you to grow spiritually and can give you a behind-the-scenes look at what it means to be a ministry leader.
7. Serve, serve, serve. Get as much experience as you can doing the work of ministry. If God is calling you to preach, find as many opportunities as possible to preach. Ask your pastor to be on the lookout for preaching opportunities at your church and at other local churches. Find nursing homes that are open to you preaching to its residents. Most importantly, seize opportunities to lead when possible. Ask God to open your eyes to nearby ministry needs. When you discover those needs, gather a team to meet them.
8. Consider additional formal education. Ministry leadership is a theological endeavor. Make a commitment to develop your ministry skills and your theological convictions. That might mean pursuing a seminary degree. But it also might mean participating in non-traditional theological study avenues that allow you to stay where you are and get the training you need. At the very least, make a commitment to becoming a lifetime learner. Develop a habit of reading books on theological and ministry topics. Lean on your mentor to help you develop a reading list.

9. Gather prayer partners. Once you commit to serving Jesus in ministry leadership, the sworn enemy of the church, Satan, will stop at nothing to end your ministry. To help you defend yourself from his snares, ask friends and family to commit to pray for you on a weekly basis. Consider preparing a short newsletter to keep those who care for you abreast of current and future prayer needs.

CONSIDER...

- Write down areas in your life, your doctrinal preparation and ministry skills where you may have weaknesses. Invite a mentor to help you do this. Brainstorm some ways you can grow in those areas.
- Look into the Haskins School of Ministry as a potential place where you can find help for practical ministry skills where you might be deficient. (<http://www.haskinsschool.org/>)

PRAY...

- Ask God to show you the areas you need to grow so you can fulfill His plan for your life.
- Pray that the Lord will give you opportunities to grow spiritually, mentally and in ministry skills.

FURTHER READING

OLD TESTAMENT

- The Calling of Moses (Exodus 3:1-4:17)
- The Calling of Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-13)
- The Calling of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:1-3)

NEW TESTAMENT

- The Calling of the Disciples (Mark 1:16-20, 2:13-14)
- The Calling of Paul (Galatians 1:1-11, Romans 1:1)
- Character Traits of a Called Leader (1 Timothy 3)

BOOKS

- *Is God Calling Me?* By Jeff Iorg
- *Discerning Your Call to Ministry* by Jason Allen
- *The Call to Ministry* by Charles Spurgeon