

ALSO CALLED
by Karen Kogler

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In the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, most professional church workers can identify with the phrase: “struggling through the call process.” In our denominational placement system, a church or school extends a “divine call” to a ministry position to an individual pastor, teacher, Director of Christian Education, or other denominationally-trained professional worker. The individual considers that call over a period of time and decides to accept or decline the call. Although most people who have been through it would definitely label the process a “struggle,” most would also say it is a very positive struggle.

The struggle includes deep personal reflection and careful examination of many factors, while, primarily, listening for God’s voice. Difficult questions are asked. How has God gifted me? What are my strengths and weaknesses? What are the needs of God’s people here? There? What has God done through me here? What might He wish to do through me in another place? Input might be sought from spouse, mentors, a few close friends. The central activity is frequent, fervent prayer, and the continual listening for God’s will through Scripture, comments of others, lists of pro’s and con’s, and the “still small voice.”

Whether the individual feels led to accept or decline the new call, the struggle often results in renewed energy for ministry, intensified sense of purpose, increased trust in God’s guidance, and a peace and calmness in being in the place God desires for you.

This denominational call process is based on the truth that God does call His people. First, He calls us to faith. (“And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.” Romans 1:6) He also calls us to sanctified living. (“For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.” 1 Thessalonians 4:7) And he calls us to specific tasks. (“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” Acts 13:2)

The people in our pews struggle with decisions. Some are based on the way they make a living. Shall I accept that offered position in another state? Is it time for a career change? Or to go back to school? Other decisions come from home life. Is it time to start a family? To buy a bigger house? Which sports teams/lessons/activity groups shall we sign the kids up for this year? They also face decisions about their service at church. Should I try to get involved in something? Shall I offer to take that volunteer position that’s been in the bulletin four weeks? Is the amount of time I’m up at church hurting my family?

Most believers take these decisions to the Lord in prayer, and desire to do His will. But if they ask “What is God calling me to do in this situation?,” new factors and new ways of making the decision may appear, in ways that grow their faith and influence the decision.

First, being called is personal. It is a person who calls, and being called by a person requires a personal response. More than simply weighing factors, the decision is put in the context of a relationship. It also reminds us of God’s involvement in all areas of our lives. Just as God is interested in whether my pastor stays here or accepts that call to St. Matthew Lutheran, so he is interested in each of our career, family and volunteer decisions. Wrestling with God’s call in specific situations brings us closer to the One who calls.

Seeking answers, we are drawn to Scripture, which continually reminds us that love of neighbor is the fruit of our faith. Our consumer-oriented culture focuses our attention on materialism and our own needs and wants, but God’s call points us to others. How will my decision affect others? What is best for them?

But the question “What is God calling me to do?” also has a healthy me-focus. God created each of us as unique individuals, and that uniqueness is part of the answer to questions of calling. What natural abilities

has God given me? What spiritual gifts? Even our personalities and our emotions are indicators of how God calls us. St. Paul, in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, compares the church to a human body. Just as each part of our body was created to carry out a certain purpose, so each of us are created with different spiritual gifts, designed for different tasks, all of which are important in the kingdom. “How have you formed me, Lord?” is part of the struggle.

“What is God calling me to do?” also focuses us on “doing.” It’s a good question to ask even when we don’t have a decision thrust upon us. God wants us to “be” many things—loving, kind, joyful, etc. But we also are to “do” His work in our homes, on our jobs, and in our churches and communities. Calling is an antidote to complacency.

What would happen if churches intentionally helped their members ask and answer the question “What is God calling me to do?” Such a practice cannot but lead to growth in discipleship. Jesus’ words, “Follow Me,” are both an invitation and a command, and also also a description of the Christian life. Following God’s call is following Jesus Christ.

Individuals who seek to follow God’s call are led to clearer and deeper understandings of God’s heart for mission. Loving our neighbors inescapably includes concern for their eternal welfare. As more individuals in a congregation seek to follow God’s call, to do the work He has in mind for them, the body functions more fully as God designed it. People do not volunteer out of guilt or obligation, which often places them in positions where their energy is drained and results are therefore mediocre. Instead, working where they are called, they are energized and passionate, and the results reflect it.

Following God’s call also improves our listening ability. We are more likely to be doing what God is ready to bless, rather than unthinkingly carrying out routines. When giving detailed instructions for construction of the tabernacle, God tells Moses, “See, I have chosen Bezalel, son of Uri, ... and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts ... Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab ... to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you.” (Exodus 31:2-6) When God calls a church to a particular task, he provides people with the needed gifts. Seeing who he has provided can help reveal the tasks.

How can churches help people ask and answer questions about calling? It can extend discussion of calling beyond professional church workers. The occasion of calling such a worker can be used as an example of discerning God’s call in daily life. People can be reminded of God’s call to all of us, encouraged to listen for God’s call, and taught the process of struggling with and discerning the call. While teaching and encouragement are best done in corporate gatherings, small groups are the best places in which we share our struggles with other believers, and often hear God’s voice through them. An understanding of calling benefits small group curriculum and leader training.

Perhaps it is not too strong to say that we need to challenge each other to seek out and struggle with God’s call, in order to be the church God wants us to be in this postmodern world.

Professional church workers know the benefits that follow “struggling through the call process:” the growth of faith and trust, the renewed energy and purpose, and the peace of being in the place God desires for you. How can we not wish those same benefits for all God’s people? ■

Karen Kogler edits Mission Moments and New Harvest for the Center for U.S. Missions from her home in Illinois, where she is also a church volunteerism consultant.