

Call: An Essay on my Call to Ministry

After four intensive years of college and two of Divinity School, I felt ready for some real world experience. I had gone to Vanderbilt Divinity School thinking I might eventually pursue a Ph. D., but also wanting to be well-grounded in ministerial studies. It was time to venture out from academia and see what the work of ministry meant for me.

I created a dilemma, however, by managing to secure invitations to two different intern positions, one at the First Baptist Church, Marietta, Ohio, the other with an ABC campus ministry at the University of Illinois in Urbana. With mixed motives and much anguish, but thinking I needed to test myself in parish waters, I chose Marietta.

As it happened, I was also about to be married. My fiancée and I had met at Vanderbilt early in the fall of 1969. We married on June 26, 1971, and my internship began on July 1. After the wedding we left her home First Presbyterian Church in Florence, Alabama, for a brief Kentucky honeymoon, pulling a small trailer hitched to the bumper of our new Dodge Dart.

Arriving in Marietta on June 30, we discovered that the pastor with whom I would be working was hospitalized with double pneumonia, contracted after suffering an acute ulcer attack while attending the annual convention of the ABC in Minneapolis. A visit with him and his wife led to my first pastoral call – a visit with a church member in that same hospital. Before my internship had even officially begun I was being introduced to the unruly demands of parish ministry.

Though still a student and not ordained, for the next three months I was the only “pastor” actively on site and on task for the congregation. We had numerous guest preachers, and I also preached my very first sermons, one each month. I supervised the church office, which was fortunate to have an experienced and congenial secretary. I staffed the board and committee meetings. I did the pastoral visitation, mainly of those in the hospital. I led the Wednesday night Bible studies and prepared portions of the Sunday worship services. My wife and I led the youth group, the one task we had expected to do on a regular basis. I frequently visited with the pastor and his wife as he recuperated and worried about the direction things might go in his absence.

I soon discovered that all was not well between the pastor and some members of the congregation. The specifics need not be recounted, but I found that church people represent some of the best and some of the worst of humanity. Come October the pastor was ready to resume his active ministry. His first Sunday back was World Communion Sunday, October 3. The following Friday afternoon he made a visit to parishioners in the hospital, came home, had a heart attack in his front yard, and died.

That Sunday was Laymen’s Sunday, as I recall, and we decided to carry on in that spirit in the absence of our pastor. We, in this case, included the chair of the Board of Deacons, the Area Minister for the Ohio Baptist Convention, and myself. In the 9:45 a.m. worship service we each spoke about carrying on the ministry that was Pastor Don’s.

After worship came the church school hour. Some time shortly after 11:00 a.m., while I was

with a young adult class upstairs in the sanctuary building, we heard a loud boom. We soon learned to our horror that the boiler that heated the church facilities and was located in the educational wing had exploded. Several agonizing hours later we learned that four young people in the 9th and 10th grade class, along with their teacher, who was husband of the church organist, had died. Two other young people were severely injured with scalding and broken bones. One would be in the hospital till the following May. The State of Ohio later passed a low pressure steam boiler inspection law, one that might have prevented the explosion if it had already been on the books.

Funerals followed on Monday and Tuesday for the pastor, the teacher, and the young people. Support was extended by other local clergy as well as denominational staff. But come the next Sunday, I was in the pulpit leading worship and trying to carry on. I sensed then, and much more later, that I would never fathom all that the circumstances demanded. But I had felt called to serve this congregation as a intern pastor, and so I did what I could. It would be February 1972 before an Interim Pastor was finally in place.

Compared to the first seven months of my internship, the last four were a delight. I got along well with the interim, a retired pastor from Baltimore and father of one of the church members. He was a calming and reassuring presence, but also a man of wit and wisdom. We privately rooted for George McGovern, and he graciously offered my wife and me the opportunity to attend the ABC convention in Denver in his and his wife's place. A lot of healing needed to take place in the congregation, but also for the newlywed couple who had been lured to this full-immersion baptism into ministry.

I returned to Vanderbilt in the fall with several new convictions. One was that it was possible to make a significant difference in the parish ministry, something I now felt called to do. Another was that I needed some time before returning to a congregational setting. I entered the D. Min. program at Vanderbilt not only to mine my experience and strengthen my ministerial credentials but also to extend my time of recuperation and preparation for re-engagement. Twenty-five years of parish ministry in West Virginia, Michigan, and Indiana followed.

Only then did I complete a Ph.D. (in religious studies) and partially fulfill the other half of me that has always reveled in scholarly inquiry and intellectually enlivened expressions of the Christian faith.

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