

# WHO'S CALLING?

*Ministry*

*Discernment,*

*Disasters,*

*Restoration*



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*Restoration*

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Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022 Toll Free (844) 2REDEEM (273-3336)

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ISBN 13: 978-1-63232-847-2 (Print)  
978-1-63232-851-9 (ePub)  
978-1-63232-852-6 (Mobi)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2015957664

# DEDICATION

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I dedicate this book to all those who respond  
to God's call.



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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I admire the courage of Athena Dean Holtz to pick up the pieces of her life to begin again in the publishing business. She sets an example for others who have been duped or led astray by those who use the words of the Bible to spiritually abuse and use people for their own selfish purposes.

I am grateful for all those who walked with me as I explored my own call for ministry and who served on my various discernment committees through seven long years. I wish to thank John Rogers and my spiritual director, Patrick Reardon, who spoke and wrote confirming my call to the diaconate, and Dennis Fotinos, who of all the many clergy and laypersons who served on my various committees discerned my true calling. My earthly father, who had his own struggles in ministry because of his disease of alcoholism, which he inherited, as did other male members of his family, neither discouraged nor encouraged my exploration

process. Instead he willed me his pectoral cross. I want to thank Tom Somerfeld who offered me a shoulder to cry on and a hug when the going got tough.

Shirley Woolaway, my friend who I traveled with to the Soviet Union in 1998 as a fellow peacemaking ambassador between the people of Russia and the United States, has remained my friend and colleague to this day.

To Robert Reid and Laurie Thompson I wish to thank you for reviewing this manuscript. And to the staff of Redemption Press, Amber Payne, and editor Inger Logelin, thanks for putting up with my many comments and changes in the proofing process of the text.

Finally, may those who read this book find hope and help, both in the discernment process for determining spiritual leaders and the restoration process for fallen ones and damaged believers. For those like me who find their true calling as followers of Jesus in restoring a broken and hurting world, may you know the riches of God's blessing on your ministry and mission.

# FOREWORD

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Mary Theresa Webb takes on and accomplishes the task of challenging both church leader and church member to each respond to the call of Jesus Christ; not the call of the flesh to please people or fear people, but to please and fear God. She is open about her own journey and provides excellent examples to draw out from the readers their own struggles, both their successes and failures. Her style is personal and frank, easily understood, even if not so easily done.

Church leaders and members need to take heed. Things cannot stay as they are. Change is required for growth. Otherwise the danger is death, a living death masquerading as real Christian living. Mary Webb pleads with an urgency that is real. Look under the surface, look at motives, don't be discouraged, but also don't be complacent. Don't conform to the standards of this world but be transformed into the calling that God uniquely has for you.

Truths uncovered through psychology and related fields are brought to bear in looking at dysfunction in families and in the church, all with an eye toward what Scripture commands for our own good and the good of others.

I recommend this book for all those who are sincere in wanting to fulfill the Great Commission, starting first with each of us, and then to our families, our churches, and to the ends of the earth.

**Irving S. Wiesner, MD**

Christian board certified psychiatrist, author and former chairman of the Committee on Religion, Spirituality and Psychiatry of the American Psychiatric Association

# INTRODUCTION

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If you believe you are experiencing a call from God, then this book will help you discern your call. If you consult with students exploring a call for ministry or missions at a Bible college or seminary, then you and your students will benefit by reading and studying the examples in this book. If you are a believer who has been hurt in a congregation, or a pastor whose personal familial patterns of behavior and abuses have surfaced to disrupt your ministry, then let this book be a guide for restoration and healing.

My experience as a parishioner, missionary, and lay leader, with pastoral counseling and addiction treatment credentials, led me to write this book. Sadly, too many spiritual leaders damage believers, thereby hurting the whole body of Christ. They themselves, and their parishioners, need healing and restoration. Far too many pastors and priests have untreated sexual abuse, substance, sex, or

pornography addictions. I've worshipped in churches where the pastor has had an adulterous relationships and where pornography addiction has nearly destroyed the church. I've been impacted by the devastating demise of a Christian publishing company with the resultant damage to the lives of its founder and authors.

And God called me. The process of discerning what God really wanted me to do versus what my inner and outer voices were telling me took almost ten years. Only in looking backward over the past twenty years has my obedience to that call borne fruit.

When a leader falls, a period of repairs to psychic damage needs to occur for both the members of the congregation, the clergyperson, and his family. Unhealthy behaviors (i.e. lousy legacies) surface in times of stress and appear as hyperactivity, out-of-control behavior, sex addictions, chemical dependencies, eating disorders, or depression, as well as codependency issues that often result in burnout. Buried dirt from old wounds spreads infection throughout the whole body until serious damage has been done. Then the denomination spends resources repairing the damage. Those resources are now lost to mission and ministry. Denominations and independent churches that do not have resources in place to help when these crises occur do not know where to begin to find help. Others have insurance policies that hinder the time required for adequate repairs to heal the wounds.

By creating examples of pastors who get into trouble, as well as by providing guidance in the discernment and restoration process, I hope, through God's grace, individuals

experiencing a call for ministry, discernment committees, and seminaries will find help and wise counsel, fallen leaders will find redemption and restoration, and damaged believers will be healed.

I'll be sharing my personal experiences discerning my "call" as well as what the Bible has to teach us.



## CHAPTER ONE

# MINISTRY CALLS

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I felt the vibration and heard the telltale “b’ring.” I sighed and hesitated. The last time I answered my smartphone the voice on the other end wanted me to support “Flowers for the Friendless.” I answered, “I don’t accept solicitations over the phone,” then hit end call.

*Maybe I’ll let the caller speak to my voice mail. If he really wants to reach me, he can text.*

The last time I listened to my voice mail a voice had said, “If you want to make a call, hang up and try again.”

With the urgency of finishing culling through e-mails disrupting my thoughts, I swiped the screen and said, “Hello! May I help you?” Dead silence. “Hello!” I tried again. “Who’s calling please?”

Now I was prepared. If a voice asked, “Is this Mary Webb or the lady of the house?” I planned to hang up before the inevitable appeal, or listen to the appeal and then give my standard response about phone solicitations. In case the

voice gave his name and called me by my familiar nickname, Terry, I could relax and listen.

But do I listen when God calls? He doesn't ordinarily call on cell phones. Growing up in a pastor's family, I knew all about "calls" from God, because that's why we moved from one town to another. With each prospective move, my parents told me God had "called" my father to serve in a new church in another town. I found out when I reached adulthood that sometimes the "calls" had more to do with a better salary in the new church than in the old one, or because of my father's belief that a clergyman did not stay in one church more than a few years.

So how does anyone today experience a "call" from God? My good friend, Betsy, listens to God every morning for his direction for that day. According to Dave Harvey in his book, *Am I Called? The Summons to Pastoral Ministry*,<sup>1</sup> one may think one hears a calling, but how does one really know? How can one be sure? Pastor Harvey places special emphasis on the importance of the church recognizing and affirming leadership and character in determining someone's true call for ministry.

Let's examine a familiar story about Samuel's call from 1 Samuel 3 (told in my own words). Samuel heard a voice calling him by name in the middle of the night, as he was serving as a boy intern with Eli the priest in the temple at Shiloh. Eli, then old and almost blind, assigned his young charge the chore of making sure the lamp guarding the ark of the covenant didn't go out during the night. Samuel may have been in that twilight sleep when he first heard a voice calling his name. Hearing his name, he rose from his

sleeping mat and went to Eli's mat and asked if the priest needed something. But Eli didn't wake up.

*Nope. Guess I was dreaming,* Samuel thought and returned to his mat.

Again he heard a voice calling his name—more urgently this time. Again he went to Eli and touched him on the shoulder. “Did you call? Do you need something?”

Eli grumbled and told Samuel he'd had a bad dream and sent him back to his sleeping mat. The third time the voice called louder and with more insistence, “Samuel! Samuel!”

Samuel trembled with dread. This time he shook Eli awake. “I'm not dreaming. I heard a voice calling my name. I'm scared. What does it mean?”

Eli must have heard the fear in Samuel's voice. Perhaps he, too, had heard God's voice calling him to serve in the holy order of Levites, or priests. So he instructed Samuel to answer the voice and listen to the message. Samuel obeyed and returned to his sleeping mat to watchfully wait for the voice to call him again. This time he answered when his name was called. “It—t—t 's m-m-me. How may I serve you?”

Samuel listened to the message but he did not act on it right away. The dreadful message he had heard from God kept him awake the rest of that night and mute the next morning while he pondered what he should do.

*Eli has been so good to me; why is God so mad at him that he wants him to die?* So he didn't give the message to Eli—until Eli insisted.

*What will happen to me when I tell him?*

Samuel liked Eli. He'd been kind to him. But Eli's sons, Hophi and Phinehas, were notorious bad actors. They took the choice bits of meat people brought for sacrifices and slept around with women assigned to serve at the tabernacle.

God had already told Eli he needed to do something to discipline his wayward sons. But Eli had failed to keep their behavior in check. He had probably given up, absorbing himself in tending to his priestly duties. Hophni and Phinehas had thus free reign to take whatever they pleased for themselves.

*If I tell Eli, and Eli tells Hophni and Phinehas, they'll gang up on me and maybe kill me.* Samuel could barely light the lamp his hands trembled so much.



## MY CALL

My pastor and I were returning from a peace commission meeting in 1983 held at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. Our peace commission had joined other lay and clergy leaders to learn from the US Defense Department about nuclear deterrence and MADD, or “mutually assured detonation and destruction.” One of the nuclear weapons they showed us photos of was called “Peacekeeper.”

“These are weapons of mass destruction,” I cried out. “Christ is our Peacekeeper!” A chill went down my spine.

“God is calling you,” my pastor said as we entered the tollgate to the Pennsylvania turnpike on the way home.

“How did you know?” I asked. Some inner voice had been saying the same thing to me over the previous few years. Bible verses, especially Micah 6:8, had been leaping off the pages of my Bible and lodging in my subconscious mind. My conscious mind began asking questions internally. *What does it mean to be a peacemaker? God, you need to stop this craziness.*

I wrote a theological paper on the meaning of *Eirene* and *Shalom*, the Greek and Hebrew words for peace, studied conflict resolution, and explored attending seminary.

Was mine a call to pastoral leadership? I’m a preacher’s kid with male clergy relatives going back for six or seven generations. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, one often inherited a religious vocation call. Missionaries and ordained clergy encouraged their children to pursue religious vocations in order to maintain the male family tradition. Before the 1960s, half the students who entered seminaries were preachers’ or missionaries’ children. I was no exception. Most of my clergy relatives exhorted, preached, and taught. They were basically good, spiritual, church leaders and founded many ministries, including the public library system, hospitals, and schools.

One day my pastor father and I were eating lunch—just the two of us.

“Tell me about your call,” he said, his eyes and ears tuned to my verbal and non-verbal response.

“It’s a servant leadership call,” I responded. “Not like yours.” In our denomination, one could be “called” to be a layperson, deacon, priest, or bishop. I believed my call was to be an ordained deacon.

My father said, “My call was only to be a pastor, not a bishop like my father. But I need to remember I’m just a servant first and foremost.”

“Have you discussed this with our bishop?” he asked.

In traditional mainline denominations such as ours, one went to one’s bishop who affirmed a call for ordained ministry. Today, the process of discerning a call to a religious vocation in existing denominations comes under the umbrella of denominational vocational commissions and committees, with a bishop’s final approval. Not only was my father’s father a bishop, but his mother was the daughter of an ordained minister and her brother, an ordained minister.

However, many today only need to attend a Bible college or be a charismatic leader to start a church, lead a congregation, or in the case of a missionary call, to become affiliated with any one of the many Christian missionary organizations. A man or woman who has a gift for speaking, shows abilities for leadership, has written a book, or believes he/she has been called to “share the gospel” may start a non-denominational church or become a missionary anywhere in the world, with little or no discernment or denominational approval. In fact, the largest church growth in the twenty-first century has occurred in non-traditional, non-denominational churches.

According to Dr. Roy Lewis, former director of the Northeast Career Counseling Center in Princeton, NJ,<sup>2</sup> when a person believes God wants her to do something special with her life, she leaves “the world” to prepare for service in religious work, either as a missionary, pastor, or by joining a religious community.

So that's what I did. I took spiritually-directed retreats. At one retreat, bees stung me. "That's how painful your ministry will be," my spiritual director told me.

At the time of my calling I had a successful career as the founder and director of an environmental organization and had just started a professional enrichment program for high school science teachers.

"I'm glad you came," my bishop responded when I told him about my call. "I wondered how long it would be before you came to see me." With his blessing, I could then take seriously my "calling" for ministry. So I quit my job and enrolled as a full time day student at my local seminary and informed the diocesan commission on ministry.

After seven years on an ordained ministry track, the direction of my "call" from God became clear. God had a plan for me entirely different from what the bishop and I believed my call to be.