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Calling in Multivocational Ministry

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This chapter examines the ways in which multivocational leaders understand, frame, discern, and apply their calling. Multivocational calling should be understood as calling in conversation with both God and a social environment. There is no single model of multivocational leadership; rather, each individual has a unique fit in relation to self, family, congregation, and additional employment. Multivocational calling needs to be articulated in a meaningful way among these pieces, and we suggest that educators and others who resource and support multivocational leaders pay specific attention to this understanding of calling.

The Wellness Project @ Wycliffe defines vocational calling as “feeling called to the ministry life you are engaged in, the fit between your personal and ministry life, and your sense of God’s direction and involvement as you move forward” (Watson et al. 2020, 29). To put it a different way, calling is not about the specific tasks ministers

do or the schedules they keep, but rather calling is a testimony of the presence of God in any context and helping those present experience this reality (compare to Root 2019, 268). In a multivocational context, calling may encompass multiple occupations, roles, or places. That is, calling is highly individualized and contextual.

This chapter begins with an overview of the larger research project—the Canadian Multivocational Ministry Project—followed by a biblical reflection on calling that makes the case for a variety of understandings of the concept. Then, a review of the research shares what we have learned about calling from multivocational leaders; we argue that calling can be understood as a conversation about the unique fit of the different elements of the multivocational life. We end with a summary of what that tells us about the training and ongoing support of multivocational leaders. For example, specific attention to unique elements for a particular individual when exploring calling would be productive in equipping the multivocational leader to thrive in their complex life and livelihoods.

The Canadian Multivocational Ministry Project

The Canadian Multivocational Ministry Project used a mixed-methods research approach to exploring multivocational ministry. The primary methodologies were a quantitative clergy wellness survey and qualitative interviews. Quantitative data was provided through cooperation with the Wellness Project @ Wycliffe, which developed a pair of questionnaires to measure ministry-specific stress and satisfaction (Malcolm, Coetzee, and Fisher 2019). This chapter concentrates on the qualitative data. The research was conducted using a community-based research approach that involved practitioners in the development of the research and in the subsequent data analysis and knowledge mobilization. The qualitative interviews adopted a semi-structured approach to allow multivocational leaders to share what they thought was important.

The research project included 40 semi-structured qualitative interviews (Watson et al. 2020). Respondents included women (16) and men (24) in diverse combinations of work and ministry roles from a variety of denominations and ethnocultural backgrounds from across Canada. The focus of the study was exploratory rather than representative, with the intent of providing insight into some com-

mon themes in the Canadian tentmaking experience (Hagaman and Wutich 2017). Interviewers asked about patterns of work in congregational ministry and other settings, what these leaders found positive or negative about their other work, how they understood their theology of work, and their recommendations for those who train or resource multivocational leaders. The interview questions addressed issues of fit and theology of work but not specifically calling. The respondents' understanding, framing, discerning, and application of their calling and the role it plays in their lives provided an insider perspective, helping us understand the nature of a calling to multivocational ministry that can inform training and support of those leaders.

Biblical Reflection on Calling

While addressing the issue of calling in diverse ways, different Christian traditions generally agree that God provides direction for vocation. Understandings range from a specific emphasis on vocation as primarily focused on clergy to consideration of additional commitments. Broader motifs of communication and direction from God found within scripture support diverse interpretations of calling. The following short review of biblical perspectives on calling points to the variety of ways calling has been understood, framed, discerned, and applied as a way of identifying and following God's direction in partnership with the unfolding *missio Dei*.

God directed Abram and Sarai to take the initial steps beyond their country of origin and promised a blessing for all people (Gen. 12). This personal direction ties into God's salvation history, and the obedience to direction partners with what God is accomplishing in the world (Wright 2006). God's direction and recognition of purpose may be identified in hindsight. For example, it is at the end of the Joseph narrative where God's purpose is fully recognized (Gen. 45). For some leaders, such as Esther, the circumstances described in the text are driven by the necessity of the situation but are interpreted in terms of divine destiny. Some follow in their appointment from their mentor's designation, such as from Moses to Joshua and Elijah to Elisha. The tradition of establishing leaders (judges, priests, prophets, kings) recognized by God and/or chosen by people contains spiritual implications for the nature of calling and provides opportunity for

theological reflection. Some of the narratives include very explicit calls from God, such as Moses responding to “I am who I am” in the desert (Exod. 3) or Eli assisting Samuel in identifying God’s voice (1 Sam. 3).

We find parallels in Jesus’s ministry. Jesus invited a disparate group to follow him. This call demanded a shift in personal obligations; he invited them to change their occupations metaphorically or metaphysically (become fishers of people). All were directed to re-align their lives. After the resurrection, Paul’s calling to be an apostle (Acts 9, 22, and 26) included a specific encounter with Jesus. Yet, Paul also provided a broader framework when he addressed the church in Rome and reminded them that they have all been called to be saints (Rom. 1). Furthermore, while there is no indication that Paul considered making tents (or leatherworking) a divine appointment, it was intertwined with his ministry of connecting with people in different communities and offering the gospel (Watson and Santos 2019). The biblical text shows there is no one way in which God calls.

Multivocational Leaders Discuss Calling

The way that multivocational leaders understood, framed, discerned, and applied calling as reported during the Canadian Multivocational Ministry Project shows all the diversity of the biblical record. Calling is very much related to the specifics of the context of the individual and the task(s) that God sets before them. Yet, in that diversity, multivocational ministers agreed on the importance of calling. Multivocational leaders’ approach to their calling encompassed their understanding of what calling is, framed why calling is necessary, explained their discernment of how to find a calling, and articulated their application of what calling does.

Calling is not an optional part of ministry training and understanding. Rather, a clear understanding of vocational calling and continual discernment of the nature and application of that calling is a vital part of the ongoing effectiveness and sustainability of multivocational ministry. One multivocational leader provided the following advice for entering this kind of ministry:

bivocational ministry is something that will only work if you have a very clear sense of call to the demands that you’ll face. Because

there's, you know, seasons and moments where bivocational / trivocational work, you're exhausted you're depleted and it's that sense of calling that you rely on, the trust that God by Spirit is going to enable you and empower you and that this is your reasonable act of service and love for God and for Jesus.¹

This leader identified the close connection between thriving in multivocational ministry and having a clear calling. They also did not confine calling to one part of the multivocational life.

Passionate about their calling, these leaders often provided a personal story or a theological explanation for that passion. The leaders we interviewed rooted their understanding of calling in the larger picture of God's work in the world.

I guess my theology of work is: starting in the Garden of Eden and God gave us work to do. . . . It wasn't a work-free zone. The expectation was that creation was to be tended and cared for, so I talked about vocation and calling and I think God created us to work; for rhythms of work and rest and meaningful work.

As opposed to compartmentalized lives, some leaders stressed a theological approach in which “nothing should be considered outside of divine oversight or our spiritual engagement” (Watson et al. 2020, 14). Many multivocational leaders had a concept of ministry that encompassed every aspect of their lives. While they did not always identify this as calling, it matches our definition because of the manner in which the different parts of their lives are addressed and the emphasis on God's direction and involvement. For these leaders, calling was typically not just to a church but also to other work within the community. Some leaders indicated that calling was necessary for effective multivocational ministry. Furthermore, some recognized that when both spouses are involved in multivocational ministry, they both have unique callings that need to be taken into account as they navigate their lives and ministries. However, not every multivocational leader included their non-congregational work as part of their understanding of ministry engagement. A few indicated the other work was primarily or solely a financial benefit.

Understanding

Multivocational leaders understood the concept of calling in many different ways. Some individuals talked about a general biblical mandate for churches or individuals. Other individuals talked about an approach to living where all aspects of life are considered part of one's spiritual vocation. Others referred to taking a specific role or being part of a specific organization as calling. Holding these different understandings of calling together, sometimes within the same individual, is a sense of listening for and following God's direction.

Multivocational leaders agreed that God provides direction for living and that some of that direction is a general biblical calling to the church as a whole. Calling as an approach to living was sometimes understood as a biblical mandate for all Christians. One respondent referenced Matthew 28:16–20: “This includes doctrines like the Great Commission but also the importance of prayer and seeking God's guidance in ministry. It's just not pastors or the church as a whole. It's as individuals. We're all called to be disciples, so we all have work to do.” This biblical conviction—that God directs—contributes to an understanding of calling as a general approach to life. Another way of describing it is one calling with a variety of different roles. One leader explained, “It's all spiritual. It doesn't matter what I'm doing. If I was serving doughnuts at Tim Hortons, it would be the same thing. So, I don't feel that; I don't see a huge divide between secular and holy work.” In sum, multivocational leaders connected calling with communication from God about specific actions and ways of living, and they understood their calling as rooted in the mandates of scripture.

For most leaders, the opportunity to express one's calling in multiple roles is a privilege, but, for the occasional individual, multiple roles lead to a ministry life without boundaries, threatening its sustainability. This reality emphasizes the need for training multivocational leaders how to navigate the diverse roles that constitute their calling or to clarify their calling.

Even individuals who talked about calling as a constant vocation that applied to all areas of life saw calling as also applying to specific roles or organizations. Some individuals talked about a specific time in their life when they received a “call.” Others talked about a call to a general ministry area, such as missions; a specific role in an organization, such as an officer in the Salvation Army; an occupation,

such as pastor or farmer; or a location, such as a particular church. Some specifically identified being bivocational as part of their calling. “Where is your heart in, in doing ministry . . . how can you best accomplish God’s call on your life? . . . for me [it] just happens to be ministry and, as well as . . . working this [Educational] Assistant job.” One couple shared about a call to ministry that initially seemed to conflict with the business they were running, which, though independent of their denominational work, they also understood as part of their vocation. However, they explained that the apparent conflict was reconciled: “We felt like God opened up the heavens and created a way for us to still serve in the denomination.”

An understanding of the integrated nature of different life responsibilities as calling can provide ministry opportunities. “Non-ministry” work provides contact with those outside the church and may provide opportunities to discuss the spiritual value of the work being done (Watson et al. 2020, 16). Such opportunities require intentionality and may be more prevalent among individuals whose secondary work is not seen as a break from ministry but rather an extension of their calling as a minister of the gospel.

Framing

Describing what calling is helps identify some of the reasons that calling is necessary: calling aligns people’s lives with their biblical reflection or spiritual discernment and helps to focus or assign meaning to life directions. An understanding of calling provides a framework for discussing God’s direction and one’s response. This framework is manifest in both application and how multivocational leaders make decisions. A meaning-making frame helps to keep multivocational leaders healthy and gives them a passion for the hard work to which they are called. Issues of decision-making, minister health—particularly in tough times—and passion for ministry action were the most commonly identified reasons why calling is necessary.

Clarity of action and decision making can be seen most clearly in multivocational leaders’ discussion of role discernment and their rationale for ministry engagement. One pastor explained: “There’s no set approach for that, but I would absolutely ensure that anyone who wants to be bivocational or tri-anything and ministry, for that matter . . . have a clear, not mere, sense . . . there is absolute clarity in

calling.” Sometimes that clarity of role and action comes from general guidelines.

So there are three kinds of phrases that are central to my sense of call and that were named at my ordination. And they are: feed my sheep, share my story and love my people . . . I don't find it particularly helpful health-wise to do things that are really not my calling. . . . And so when the opportunity to edit came up, it aligns so closely with what I feel it means to be able to share God's story more broadly . . .

This individual's general calling framework (that is, feed, share, love) might be widely shared with other ministry leaders, but they then apply it in a very specific manner to an editing job. For other individuals, calling to decision making was relatively specific:

[we] spent a weekend fasting and praying and asking God for direction. And we both had this moment where she said, I'm really sensing God calling us to a smaller place, a place where there isn't a Christian counselor and a place where they have [struggled to] get a pastor and I said, "Yeah, that's exactly what I was hearing from God."

For this couple, decision making was not derived from general principles but rather from the specific skills they had and a time of discernment.

This sense that God has called one to something plays a key role in making life meaningful and thus in minister health. Over 90% of multivocational leaders rated vocational calling as a “core satisfier” in the wellness survey; those who did not “showed indices of burn-out” (Watson et al. 2020, 9). Further, the interviews suggested that “calling appears to play a pivotal role in clarity and persistence” (19). This is not surprising given the challenges of multivocational ministry identified by respondents (for example, family organization, complicated scheduling, erratic support). Such challenges are easier to surmount if one is convinced that one is living a life to which one is called by God. If God has called one to a specific set of responsibilities, it is reasonable to assume that God will provide the necessary resources to fulfill them. One leader explained the dichotomy like this: “the things that God has asked us to do are hard, and there's that weird . . . juxtaposition where Jesus [says], 'Come, come walk with me, learn the unforced rhythms of grace . . . learn to live freely and lightly' but Jesus is talking about a yoke.” For this individual, the hard things God asked them to do were made feasible by the specific call

on their life and by the general scriptural description of the nature of God's calling.

However, calling is not just necessary for practical reasons like decision making and helping with hard times. Calling also brings energy and passion for what needs to be done. Explained one pastor, "my true passion is, the number one is, church planting. I'm definitely a pioneer . . . the centre of my purpose would be to be a pioneer and to plant churches and so many others." Passion came from being where God wanted them to be. Many multivocational leaders talked about calling as being connected to gifting, with gifting being something one is good at, either because of innate ability or because of God-given supernatural aptitude. Awareness of that gifting was part of hearing from God. If calling is hearing direction from God, passion would seem to be the resulting inner spiritual drive that results from clarity of calling.

Discernment

This discussion of gifting was closely connected with discerning the process of calling—how to articulate or find a call and the related theme of how God calls. Multivocational leaders had much to say about the discernment process with specific attention to hearing from God and attending to gifting.

Hearing from God and attending to gifting were the most-mentioned parts of the discernment process. Other means of discerning calling included fasting, discernment groups, family conversation (including with children), trusted advisors, circumstances, or self-assessment. Some multivocational leaders had a clearly thought-through process for discernment. This quote illustrates the degree to which some leaders have worked out their understanding of discernment and how to guide others through this process:

I feel like I would need to have a conversation with them and find out some specifics of what they're feeling or thinking. And then, if the Holy Spirit would be guiding me, just give them some words at that moment, then I would deliver those words . . . I feel like I would just pray with them . . . I would ask them to explain to me the thoughts that are going on around the job. When and where that desire originated. What kind of tasks they would see themselves doing. How those tasks fit in with their spiritual gifting. I would ask them a bit about their

home-work-life balance. I would ask them about their awareness of their emotional responses to the ideas of the job and if they were positive or negative and how just to get a reading of emotionally where they're at. I would encourage them. And I would encourage them to [also discuss] the ideas and possibilities with other godly people in their life.

This individual not only thinks working out one's calling is related to discernment but has thought through a process of discerning that includes spiritual, practical, and emotional elements. This further emphasizes the need for discussions of calling to take into account the entire life of the ministry leader. Not all respondents had a discernment process as elaborate as this one, but some approach to discernment was common and used to make many types of life decisions. Multivocational leaders discerned the role or location of their activity, as well as education and family choices that are less commonly considered in discussions of calling. Not only does multivocational calling encompass all of leaders' lives, but much of this discernment takes place in conversation with others with a specific focus on hearing from God.

Hearing from God is a fundamental part of the way multivocational leaders understood their calling. It is hearing from God that led these leaders to take up specific positions, move to certain cities, start certain organizations, and engage in multivocational ministry. That is not to say that listening to God was always easy. One leader explained, "Jesus is nuts, he calls us to do ridiculous things, things that are hard and terrible and difficult and dangerous and all of those things." This leader was not arguing that Jesus is unreasonable but rather that following Jesus can be challenging. They were not questioning what God was calling them to do but recognizing there can be a cost. Another participant made a similar point: "You know I have one plan for my life and God had another. And so I followed God into officership [pastoral leadership] kicking and screaming. And I'm thankful today that I did." This sense of the necessity of following God's direction was so strong that leaders would pursue it over the instructions of their organization if necessary: "if I'm going to listen to [church] or [denomination] or God, it's going to be God." While many leaders talked about these kinds of intense beliefs about how to hear from and pursue God's call, a lot of the discussion was about the mundane business of daily faithfulness: "we pray every day asking the direction of God through the Holy Spirit." Prayer was a con-

stant presence in multivocational leaders' understanding of their responsibilities.

Almost as commonly mentioned as prayer was the need to attend to the gifting of the leader to figure out how to live the multivocational life. Sometimes this was a reference to a specific skill set (such as spiritual direction or marketing). At other times this was a reference to general aptitudes. There was some understanding that attending to gifting was important not only for discerning calling but also to maintain passion and keep the individual from burnout. Gifts needed to be identified and cultivated so that their value could be brought to the ministry. Some also argued that gifting was for a specific task and perhaps provided for a specific time.

Discernment, hearing from God, attending to gifting, and many other aspects of finding a calling are closely related to self-awareness. Multivocational leaders needed to know how to fit the many pieces of a complex life together in a way that allowed them to sustain their lives. One leader explained, "just really know the niche that you're wired for. And so that plays into boundaries too, if there's something that you're just not good at don't be a superhero." The large variety of ministries, other work, and life circumstances among our forty interviewees showed no one pattern of multivocational ministry. Self-awareness of how one is called was crucial for these leaders to identify the unique fit of the different elements that are part of their lives.

Application

Calling matters for multivocational ministry. An exploration of what calling is, why it is necessary, and how to find it already provides substantive detail about what calling does. Calling explains actions, makes ministry meaningful, and provides guidance by, among other things, helping to set priorities and developing gifting and leading people to the unique fit of their calling.

Calling provides a reason why certain actions are taken. This applies to the movement into ministry, and multivocational leaders also applied it to other life roles. For example, non-ministry jobs were considered for their compatibility with the ministry role. There were a variety of ways leaders understood compatibility, and there were several who lamented a lack of compatibility. This sense of a calling to certain action could also extend beyond work towards the daily

business of living. One individual explained how they worked this out as a ministry couple: “As a pastor and a spiritual director together . . . we discern almost everything based on our sense of call, yeah. Even . . . how often we do things or . . . whether things are congruent with who we are and who we’ve been called to be in the world.” This congruence or alignment of actions is clarified through reflection on calling.

Having a reason for action contributes to making ministry meaningful. This is not only about dealing with hard times but also about knowing one can draw on God’s support and just enjoy the work to which one is called: “It’s all my ministry, and it’s what I get to do, so it’s not work for me, you know.” Many participants talked about a joy and passion for the ministry: “Ministry is my passion. When I say I feel fully alive when I’m writing a sermon or doing a visit or even preparing a funeral and that sort of thing—these are things that I love to do, and they give me life.” However, multivocational leaders did not always agree on whether they had choice in the nature of the calling. For example, one couple we talked to disagreed with each other on this issue.

The understanding that calling provides a reason for action and makes ministry meaningful fits naturally with an understanding that God prepared the multivocational minister for the kind of work they are doing. God calls and guides them through situations and circumstances. God’s guidance extended beyond the specific tasks of ministry to a calling towards appropriate life priorities: “I realized that not living with balance . . . not being obedient to the idea of rhythm and balance and rest in the scriptures is . . . not living [how] God called me to be.” Calling provides guidance not just for what should be done but for what one should not do. One can identify this, in part, by how God develops the leaders’ gifting. Self-awareness of gifting and passions helps to recognize calling manifested in a vocation.

Multivocational leaders also talked of how something learned in one part of their life could be brought into other parts of their life. They talked about cultivating self-awareness and being intentional in their multivocational lives. One leader talked about “having a space to belong” and the value of working with others to have the gifts necessary to create that space. Another leader explained that, in multivocational ministry, “both roles [inside and outside the church] press into me this deep calling.” These leaders’ references to calling

are all related to the unique manner in which God is weaving together the pieces of their lives.

Unique Fit and Implications for Training

The concept of unique fit should be considered for training multivocational leaders. Unique fit means that each multivocational leader has a combination of life circumstances (ministry, family, individual characteristics, additional employment) specific to what God is doing in their lives and what God is calling them to do in a particular context. This is shaped by both general biblical or theological conceptualizations of calling and by the unique understanding they have developed of their specific circumstances. The multivocational leader engages in a partnership with God to identify how this unique fit works in their specific context. Thus, calling can be both a general approach to living and a specific combination of commitments. Self-awareness of this unique fit contributes to clarity of action, minister health, and passion for what God has asked of the individual. Clarity requires discernment and a listening approach to the work of God as it manifests in individual lives, such as through gifting. If we can agree that calling for multivocational leaders is characterized by the concept of unique fit, then there are several training implications.

The first is simply the willingness to assist ministers in development to embrace the complexity and discern the spiritual significance that holds the different pieces together. We have previously argued, “Theological educators should continue to emphasize calling but also help people understand how differentiated and complex it might be. They also need to be explicit that calling can be multivocational” (Chapman and Watson 2020, 8). Some multivocational leaders have been made to feel that their calling is second-class as compared to full-time ministers or ministers with more traditional church responsibilities. Trainers and other resource people could reflect on their students’ personal calling to their unique contexts so that curriculum corresponds to the various needs that are present in students’ actual lives.

Second, organizations that train multivocational leaders could develop partnerships of discernment between students and the ecclesial body to which they are responsible. Such relationships could contribute to an understanding of how calling applies to different

areas of leaders' lives. Theological instructors and academic institution-based spiritual directors or mentors could foster both appreciation for the biblical understanding of calling and its application to diverse combinations of vocational commitments. It could also reduce the conceptual disconnect that some in ministry encounter between their training and the application of that training to the real world.

Third, the value of the different roles leaders fill and how those roles interact with each other should be taken into account in the exploration of calling to avoid, as much as possible, a disconnect between different work responsibilities. Multivocational leaders need to be supported in the integration between spiritual calling, non-traditional ministry careers (business, trades, medical, and other examples), and daily life. A broader sense of calling that encompasses more than just church roles is necessary.

Finally, this leads to the necessity to train multivocational leaders beyond the limited range of knowledge skills normally associated with pastoral ministry. It may be argued for all ministry practitioners that other life factors such as family responsibilities and personal and spiritual care should be considered, but these take on added importance in the complexity of multivocational ministry. Additional skills with general applications beyond congregational leadership (such as team development or professional ethics) could be considered in addition to any possible instruction that may be specific to a particular career. In this way, multivocational leaders can be equipped to serve God in the lives they actually have.

Calling is a complex and multifaceted aspect of multivocational lives. However, the different understandings, framings, manners of discerning, and applications of calling provided by multivocational leaders challenges us to resist oversimplification. That is, calling is no one thing. It is worked out in the messy business of life and practical ministry. Effective training of multivocational leaders will take into account how the contextual uniqueness of the different elements of specific leaders' lives reflects and contributes to their calling.

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Endnotes

- 1 Some quotations have been edited for grammatical clarity.