

the call of a lifetime

How to Know if God Is Leading You to the Ministry

KEITH DRURY



Indianapolis, Indiana

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To my sons—
David Drury and John Drury



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preface

The title of this book is *The Call of a Lifetime* because the ministry is one of the greatest things that you can do with your life. So what makes the ministry such a high calling? Ministers lead and serve the church, and the church is the primary tool that God uses to accomplish his will on earth. Jesus Christ established the church, and he is its cornerstone. God has built the church through the apostles and other leaders over the last two thousand years. And Jesus promised that the very gates of hell will not prevail against his church. While the church has often been stained and suffers many weaknesses—after all, it is made up of people like you and me—it is still God’s primary plan for bringing his kingdom to earth. A call

to the ministry is a call to work full-time with the church. The ministry is therefore a high calling.

The ministry is a high calling also because it deals with eternal matters: the Word of God and the souls of men and women. When all the cool video games have passed away and there are no more haircuts to be given, meals to eat, or houses to live in—in short, when earth has passed away—the Word of God and the souls of people will continue through all eternity. A minister spends his or her whole life dealing with these things of eternal value. It is a high calling.

That doesn't mean that other professions do not have great value—they do. And we can appreciate all of them without diminishing the value of Christian ministry. If God calls you to the ministry, you can be sure that you have received a high calling. It is a worthwhile way to invest your life and come to a happy and fulfilled end.

This book is for men and women who are pondering a call to the ministry. While it will be of value for people of any age, it is especially designed for younger people. It is not written about you, but to you, almost as if it were a series of e-mails you'd received from a friend. The book answers basic questions about the ministry, like the ones found at the beginning of each chapter. This book is designed to be read over time, not in a single sitting, so some of the material is repeated here and there as a way of helping you remember.

As you read, it may be helpful for you to see where I'm coming from as the author. Nobody writes in a vacuum; we all have personal biases. The following descriptions of this book may help you understand the ministerial ethos from which I write, so you may be able to counterbalance any of my prejudices or errors as you read.

First, this book espouses a high view of the ministry. You will find here a book that does not depreciate the ministry in order to pump up the importance of other vocations. I believe that the

ministry is a high and holy calling and that the calling is as old as the Bible itself. I think professional ministry is a wonderful way to spend your life and that you'll get great fulfillment from a life so spent. I believe all Christians are called to minister to others, but some are specifically set apart as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers. God calls these people to be equipping ministers, and they are his gift to the church (see Eph. 4). I think everybody ought to *want* to be called to the ministry because it is a wonderful way to invest one's life. But I believe that not everybody is called. The ministry is limited to those who are called by God and confirmed by the church. If this book fails to raise your view of the ministry, it has failed in one of its primary objectives.

Second, this book is about ordained ministry. Every Christian, of course, is called to minister—to serve others. But some are called by God into lifelong ministry. These are the people the church sets apart, or ordains. But there is also a group in between laypeople and ordained ministers: people in full-time religious work who are not ordained. They might be music directors, youth workers, parachurch ministry staffers, camp directors, worship leaders, Christian school teachers, church secretaries, business managers, or any number of others who work full-time doing religious work but are not ordained. There are two major differences between ordained and non-ordained church workers: First, ordained ministers perform sacred acts that only they are authorized to do, things like presiding at Holy Communion, performing weddings, and preaching regularly; and second, ordained people are set apart for lifelong service. For them, ministry isn't a temporary job. Sometimes people head into the ministry without knowing this distinction and begin preparing for ordination when they really ought to go into non-ordained church work. Both can be full-time jobs in the church, and working as a lay staff person or lay missionary is a good thing to do. This book, however, is not written for

people who want to work for five years as a lay staffer at a Christian camp and then do something else. It is for people who feel called to lifelong ordained ministry.

Third, this book advocates a clear call to the ministry. The ministry is a wonderful way to invest one's life, but the only people who should enter it are those clearly called by God. There is no test you can take to find out if you should be a minister. There are tests that will tell you if your temperament exhibits some of the personality traits that are important for ministry or if you have the aptitudes most ministers possess. But these are just evidences to consider; they are not a call from God. God calls men and women to equip, lead, and serve his people. He's done that for thousands of years, and he still does. Your call may come in one of several ways—dramatically, quietly, instantly, or gradually—but there is no single indicator that will give you absolute certainty that God has called you to the ministry. You may have only an inkling of this call today, but be assured that if God is calling you to the ministry, he will eventually make your calling sure. If you never feel sure, don't enter the ministry.

Fourth, this book assumes a high view of the church. As important as the personal call is, it is not complete until the church confirms it. Your life in ministry is not between you and God. It is a three-way deal between you, God, and the church. God calls a minister to work with his church, the body of Christ on earth. There are many fun and exciting things a person might do in life, but nothing is as exciting and important as serving the church. The local church is God's plan to reach the world and make disciples of all nations. There are other tools that he uses, but the church is his primary tool. There are other things you can do with your life as an ordained minister (for example, teach other ministers, as I do), but none of them is as important or long lasting as ministering in a local church to the same congregation week after week. You may feel more famous if you travel around and speak at

conventions, but that would be a second-place position compared to the pastors, youth pastors, and staff pastors in local churches, who really make the greatest impact on the world. This book will encourage you to think about local church ministry as the best way to do God's work on earth.

Fifth, in this book, you will see a lofty view of ordination. You should know that there are some churches that won't agree with the high view of ordination presented in this book. Some churches dismiss the ministry as nothing more than paid laity. There are even a few independent churches that will ordain high school students, then send them to college to prepare for the ministry to which they are already ordained. Occasionally, a church will ordain people just so they can get the break on their taxes. But most denominations hold a much higher view of ordination, one more in line with the viewpoint of this book. I believe ordination is a sacred vow that should not be taken without serious thought, at least as much thought as should be given to entering marriage. Ordination is not a temporary driver's permit. It is a lifelong commission from the church to be a prophet and priest. Don't get ordained just to try ministry for a few years and see if you like it. If you have that attitude, get a job in the church that doesn't require ordination. Ordination is for people who plan to be lifelong ministers. Something mystical and spiritual actually happens in your ordination service. It is more than an official act, like pledging allegiance to the flag or being inducted into the military. Most denominations expect actual power to come into the person at ordination. They even have a special prayer designed to provide this experience. Your ordination service will be a powerful event where the church will set you apart for ministry. At that moment, God will come and do something in your soul—if you let him.

Sixth, this book is written to both men and women. There is a whole chapter in this book for women who are called to the ministry, but it is important for you to know that I believe that God

calls both men and women into the ministry. And when God calls people, they must obey. The Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant denominations do not permit women to be ordained ministers. I think they are wrong and that they will eventually realize it. But until they do, if you are a woman whom God has called, you may have to leave the denomination of your youth in order to find a church that will confirm your call. That may not be fair or nice, but it is the truth. So when God calls, what are you to do? You must answer his call.

While this book may present a higher view of the ministry, the church, ordination, and the call than you are familiar with, it is not just the personal view of this author. It represents the historic position of most denominations. Check your own denomination's view on these matters to see if it differs from this book. You can do that by reading your denomination's ministerial preparation website or manuals.



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what is the ministry?

When people speak of being called into the ministry, what do they mean? What do ministers actually do all day? We see them up front on Sundays, but what do they do through the week? Is the ministry interesting work? What do ministers like most about it? What do they like least? Is this something you might like to do?

This book is about the ministry—not so much the general ministry that every Christian should be doing, but *the ministry* as a vocation or life calling from God. This ministry is a lifetime vocation of helping God’s people—the church—grow, develop, reach out, and worship him.

The ministry has been viewed through history in at least three ways. First, some have seen it as an appointment to which a person is assigned by others. The Levites in the Old Testament come to mind as examples of this approach. A Levite was a Levite because he or she was a child of another Levite; he or she inherited the appointment. A few churches today still have this view—they elect

from among their own congregation the most mature and spiritual member as an elder to serve as their pastor. And the idea of inheriting the ministry might still be echoed in the fact that so many sons and daughters of ministers also enter the ministry.

Investing your life in the ministry just might provide the greatest satisfaction.

A second way to view the ministry is as a profession. A person with this view might take a vocational test and discover his or her suitability to several professions, including the ministry, then after prayer choose to enter the ministry because it is a worthwhile way to spend life. Many (but not all) mainline Protestant ministers enter the ministry on this basis because it is a wonderfully worthwhile profession.

A third way of viewing the ministry is as a calling. Here the individual feels God has personally called him or her to be a minister, so he or she prepares to be one. Most denominations in the revivalist tradition practice this third approach. However, on closer examination, even revivalist churches expect the individual to submit to a church appointment and they might examine the candidate's gifts and graces for the profession. So even among revivalist churches there is a measure of concern for profession and appointment.

This book comes from the revivalist tradition, so it will present ministry primarily as a calling. But by that I'm not saying that churches and ministers who take other approaches are wrong and their ministries are invalid. As the process of entering the ministry is developed, we shall see that most churches combine all three views in one way or another.

The ministry is a wonderful way to spend your life if God lets you. While few ministers get famous, and even fewer get rich, there are far greater rewards than money or fame, rewards that last through all eternity. It is almost impossible to find an older minister who doesn't think his or her life was wonderfully meaningful. Go

ahead and ask several! Ask them if they regret going into the ministry, and if they think their lives were well invested. Almost every one of them will say, “I’d do it again in a second.” Of all the things you could choose to do with your life, investing it in the ministry might just provide the greatest possible satisfaction. If God calls you to it, you’ll love the ministry as a vocation.

it’s hard, but it’s worth it

Don’t get the idea that the ministry is a cushy job without trial or difficulty. It isn’t. Ministry today might be one of the toughest professions you could consider. As a minister, you will be called to lead a congregation of people who have widely differing opinions and preferences. They will want church to be like a fast-food restaurant where they can order exactly what they want and receive it in seconds.

In many denominations, the people you’ll lead will also be your bosses; they might get to vote on keeping you as their minister or even vote you out so that you have to go to another church. In business if you are dissatisfied with employees, you can fire them; but you can’t fire church members (although in many cases they can fire you!). And people, being who they are, can sometimes get downright nasty. Often, it’s the minister who bears the brunt of their displeasure.

And there is competition. There will be dozens of other churches down the street from you that will offer better programs, bigger screens, and more exciting and relevant music. Sometimes people leave one church and move to another. It hurts when people leave the church you lead, yet you can’t hold your congregation at arm’s length and say, “It’s just business.” It’s hard to not take rejection personally.

But the real competition isn't from other churches. All Christians are really on the same side. The real competition comes from the Devil. If you started a business, you might face stiff competition from other businesses, but the Devil is not likely to spend much energy trying to run you out of the hardware trade, for example. The Devil focuses on the church with his evil, competitive program. He'll try to drive your church out of business and you out of the ministry. That may be the Devil's chief work on earth! The minute you accept a call to the ministry, you will have a bull's-eye on your chest.

If you are called to the ministry, you aren't promised an easy life, but you are promised a life that's worthwhile.

The ministry is more fulfilling than it is easy. It's hard work, but it's worth it. It's a bit like running a marathon, where you sweat more than the bystanders and hurt more than the spectators. Your muscles ache and scream for you to give up.

There's no doubt about it, the ministry can be tough at times. A marathon runner never likes the pain in his or her legs, yet he or she still runs because finishing the race is a worthwhile goal. And of course, even an aching, sweating runner gets a runner's high during the race. Ministers get many ministry highs, but even on the days when it doesn't feel particularly good to be a minister, they keep going because they believe ministry is a worthwhile and eternal pursuit. When you cross the minister's finish line, you'll know that it was worth it! If you are called to the ministry, you aren't promised an easy life, but you are promised a life that's worthwhile.

what does a minister actually do?

Knowing the daily work of a minister will tell you a lot about what you may like or dislike about this calling. But be careful: You

shouldn't enter the ministry simply because it sounds like fun or is a good career fit. It takes more than a vocational test to send you into the ministry. It takes a clear call from God that is confirmed by the church. If you enter the ministry, do so because you are called by God, not because it fits your personality or personal likes and dislikes. (More on "the call" in a later chapter.)

To help you get an accurate idea of what ministers actually do throughout the week, here is a summary of the general types of work that they do.

church work

Ministers work with the church—the body of Christ on earth. God is at work in the world mostly through his church. The church is the place where Christians gather for worship, evangelism, discipleship, and service. No, God is not limited to the church, but he does most of his work in and through it. That is his plan to reach and change the world. The vast majority of ministers are associated with a local church. Even so-called parachurch organizations (like InterVarsity, Campus Crusade, or Young Life) could not exist without the support of local churches, and the people who work in such organizations are full participants in local churches. The local church is at the center of God's plan to win and disciple followers, and bring his kingdom to pass here on earth. Sometimes the local church falls short of God's vision for it, but it is still his primary means for accomplishing his plan in the world. While there are some jobs in ministry that are done completely outside the local church, almost all ministers do work that is in some way connected with a local congregation. If you don't like the local church, don't go into the ministry; that's where most ministers spend their careers.

people work

Ministers work with people all the time. When ministers get into trouble, it's usually because they don't get along with people rather than because of some immorality. God's ministry is to serve God's people; so if you enter his ministry, you'll be working with his people most of the time. You may start the day at a breakfast meeting to plan an upcoming event with someone from your church. Then you might go to a staff meeting at church where you'll coordinate plans for the day and week. Next, you might have several appointments with people, scheduled back-to-back, about all kinds of things; some might be serious problems, others might be routine administrative matters. After that, you might go to lunch with parents who have some questions about how to handle their teenager during a difficult time. That afternoon you might have some quiet time for study and prayer. And what will you pray for? People! After dinner with your family, you might go to an evening committee meeting, a church service, or maybe a counseling appointment with a couple planning to get married. People, people, people!

Ministers spend a lot of their time with people. If you are called into the ministry and don't like people, start praying now that God will give you the only gift that will sustain this much people work: love. The work of the ministry is mostly people work.

pastoral care

Consider these scenarios: A high school athlete snapped her anterior cruciate ligament and was taken to the hospital where she's about to find out that her senior year of soccer is now over. An old woman living alone fell and broke her hip yesterday and wasn't discovered until this morning; her children live two states away and don't know yet. A young couple in the church had a baby last night but the newborn child is on a respirator because something went wrong. A man and woman who've been married ten years

have been arguing so fiercely that they are considering a divorce. There are two aged church members, great saints of the church, who are now in nursing homes and seem to be forgotten; few people visit them. A fifty-five-year-old man was given a pink slip when he showed up at the factory this morning; he'd worked for the same company for thirty-five years and now has no idea how he'll pay his daughter's college bill.

All of these people have one thing in common: They all want you. Well, not exactly you. They want God, but they consider you to be the closest thing to him. When life begins to fall apart, people look to God for strength and consolation.

The minister is often the primary representative of God to these people. If reading the scenarios above made your heart hurt—you felt a bit of compassion for those hurting people—good for you. If you had no response at all yet feel sure that you are called to the ministry, begin asking God to share his compassion with you. But if you have no plans ever to be with hurting people in times of crisis, then the ministry is not for you. The work of the ministry includes giving tender pastoral care to hurting people.

When life begins to fall apart, people look to God for strength and consolation. The minister is often the primary representative of God to these people.

worship leading

Laypeople see their minister most during worship. Some think leading worship is all they do! While a minister has plenty of other duties, leading worship is certainly one of the most wonderful. Planning and leading worship provides the greatest job satisfaction for many ministers. Even if you serve on the staff of a church and don't get to preach or even say anything during worship, this event is usually the high point of the week for most ministers. Here ministers get to see the people of God gathered to give their praise

and to hear him speak. A minister's job almost always includes learning how to plan and lead worship.

preaching

Ministers represent the people to God and God to the people. They represent the people to God through intercessory prayer, sacraments, and other rituals, but they represent God to the people by reading Scripture and preaching. When a minister preaches, he or she speaks for God by delivering a message from him. It is a scary task at first—and always. Just like the ancient prophets, a minister sometimes encourages, affirms, and comforts the people. At other times, the minister corrects, chastens, or even scolds the people.

So how does the minister know what to say? God's words have already been spoken in the Bible. A minister seeks God's guidance to determine which part of the Bible speaks to this church, this week, through this minister. He or she does this by both assessing the people's needs and by listening to God through prayer. Youth ministers do this with teenagers. Senior pastors do it with the entire church. Other staff ministers may get to preach only occasionally, but whenever they do, they speak for God, not just for themselves. That is the difference between a speech and a message.

teaching

The pastor is the chief Bible teacher in a local church. All Christians need to know what the Bible says, what it means, and how it applies to life today. Ministers teach them. Ministers often teach Sunday school classes or new member classes, and most teach some sort of mid-week Bible study or class. Some who are especially adept at it even teach during worship services along with preaching. Even if you have a staff assignment that doesn't include preaching, it will probably include lots of teaching.

rituals

Consider these stories: Kara and Jeremy are engaged and have planned a church wedding for this Saturday. Dan and Laura just had a baby girl and want to dedicate their child to God this Sunday. Alex, Faith, Craig, Tammy, Jamie, and Paul all came to faith in Christ during the past month and are prepared to be baptized this week. Agnes passed away Monday, and her funeral will be held at the church this afternoon. This coming Sunday is also the first Sunday of the month, the day this church usually offers Communion.

Each of these occasions (and other milestones in life) is marked by one of the sacraments or rituals of the church. These are symbolic actions that help people celebrate, grieve, or process some spiritual event. Ministers officiate such rituals, helping people move from one stage of life to another. Pastors are often ministers of transition. It is some of the happiest work a minister gets to do.

Ministers help people move from one stage of life to another.

evangelism

All Christians have a responsibility to spread the good news about salvation, but ministers have a special burden to see lost people come to faith in Christ. When asked about the most satisfying aspect of ministry, many will say, “Leading people to faith in Christ,” or “Watching people grow in their faith.” All ministers get the opportunity to do this. They even get paid for it!

Mark 10:46–53 tells the story of a blind man who stopped Jesus beside the road and asked to be healed. How would a blind man have known that Jesus was about to pass by? The story doesn’t say, but someone probably told him. That’s our job. We don’t have to restore sight; that’s God’s job. And we can’t save anybody; that’s God’s job too. Our job is simply to announce his arrival.

discipleship and mentoring

Ministers are generally appointed to serve an entire community of people, but they spend plenty of one-on-one time with people also. Ministers disciple, provide accountability for, and mentor leaders in the church. When college students are asked to list the people who have had the greatest impact on their lives, ministers are often near the top.

administration

A minister is not just a preacher, but often a church's CEO as well, managing the sprawling programs of a local church. Administration includes things like making budgets, conducting meetings, writing letters, doing paperwork, recruiting people, organizing events, calling people on the phone, and gathering facts. This office work is a part of ministry, just like pastoral care. While some ministers don't particularly like this part of the job, they do it because it is necessary to keep the church moving. Many ministers, however, see administrative work in a better light. They consider administration to be their greatest act of service, since it is usually done behind the scenes and brings little praise, but it is necessary. Either way, ministers should tackle administration with joy.

Ministers disciple, provide accountability for, and mentor leaders in the church.

Administration includes things like making budgets, conducting meetings, writing letters, doing paperwork, recruiting people, organizing events, calling people on the phone, and gathering

leadership

Every Christian should minister to others and serve the church. Being a minister is not about getting paid to do what every Christian is supposed to do anyway. It is more than being a full-time Christian. Ministry is leadership. It is helping the people of God discover what God wants them to do, then organizing them to accomplish it. The minister's job is to call out and equip Christians to do their work.

This is one reason we ordain ministers. God calls ministers, but the church ordains them. When we do that, we are saying that this man or woman is anointed by God as a leader. That doesn't mean that ministers can act like kings and boss everybody around. We do not need any more pastor-as-master types in the church. But we do need more pastor-as-servant leaders—ministers who recognize that the privilege of leadership must be used to serve the best interests of the people. Ministers are called to lead the people of God in discovering and fulfilling his vision for them. So even if you do not consider yourself a leader, when you are in the ministry, people will look to you for guidance.

community relations

A minister is God's representative to the people. Primarily, that means that he or she represents God to a local church. But ministers have a similar role in the communities in which they live. Ministers cannot collapse their sphere of influence to fit exclusively within the congregation; they must also relate to the entire city or town. The minister is a community leader, not just a local church leader. The minister represents his or her church to the community by serving on boards, organizing events, and sometimes even by running for elected office. A minister can go few places—especially in a smaller town—without being recognized as “the pastor,” a representative of his or her church. That relationship works both ways. A minister must also represent the needs of the community to the congregation, serving as a sort of go-between for the community and the church.

exploring your call

to share

1. Of all the things ministers do, which two do you feel most nervous about doing yourself?
2. Which ones do you most look forward to doing?

to discuss

1. How do you think the work of the ministry could change in the next twenty years? How might ministers keep current and relevant so as to not become ineffective or out of touch?
2. This chapter proposes that the ministry is hard but worth it. Do you think some ministers have it easier than others? Is there any way to avoid the unpleasant parts of the ministry? How?

to do

1. Interview an experienced minister and make a list of ways that his or her work has changed over the years. Ask about what he or she does more, less, or differently. Ask what activities or processes he or she has started doing or stopped doing.
2. Make a chart of the ministerial activities listed in this chapter, then rate yourself from one to ten for each activity, based on your present abilities and interests. Pick the two strongest activities, and list ways you might leverage these strengths even now as you prepare for ministry. Pick the two weakest abilities, and list ways you might improve in both.