

LIFE IS CALLING

Calling Conversations Participant Guide



CENTER *for*
CONGREGATIONAL
RESOURCES
AT SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

Welcome to Calling Conversations

Welcome to the Life is Calling study developed to challenge individuals to consider the seasonal nature of God's calling on their lives. This material is an adaptation of *The White Shirt* by Michael Alan Tate, a book and workbook meant to help find a "peaceful and life-giving career" (www.whiteshirtbook.com). We hope these four sessions will be meaningful and affirming as you engage in discussion with fellow church members and take time for introspection.

This study was not created to help you pinpoint one particular calling you have at this moment in time. It was created to raise your awareness of how the needs you see each day, the ways you've served throughout your life, and your gifts and talents all intersect to reveal ways in which you can serve the Kingdom that bring you a greater sense of fulfillment. It is important to notice as you move through the sessions that some of these things have been significant in your life from an early age, and some might be fruits of the season of life in which you currently find yourself.

At the end of the study, we hope you will be able to:

-acknowledge that there is a place of service for you in your community.
-recognize that there is a role for you that makes the best use of your instincts, talents, and interests.
-identify areas and aspects of your life that bring you meaning and purpose.
-vocalize a clearer sense of how God is calling you to serve God's world.
-determine real-life ways you can live out your sense of calling, starting now.
-affirm that the discipline of discernment has no time or age limits.
-communicate your understanding of calling to others.

Thank you for your participation.

Grace and peace,
The Life is Calling Team

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This book belongs to:



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Part 1: Why am I Here?

Overview & Introduction

The purpose of this session is to explore the meaning of calling from the Bible and begin to see how to use your gifts and talents from a different perspective.

Introductions

1. Where were you born?
2. What is your birth order?
3. Tell us about an interesting or exciting thing you experienced as a child.

Part 1: Why am I Here?

A Familiar Story

Jack is a retired law enforcement officer who serves in his local church in various capacities. He is a deacon, drives the church bus to deliver "backpack buddies" bags to the public school each week, is on the Buildings and Grounds Committee, and just joined the Finance Committee because "they couldn't find anyone else willing." Jack rarely looks forward to deacons meetings and it is even more seldom he enjoys the work of the Finance Committee. Serving in both of these capacities means a lot of attention to financial detail, sitting in meetings for an hour or more at the time, and too often involves making difficult decisions that some would call "church politics." In his free time at home, Jack enjoys woodworking, taking care of the lawn and garden, sitting outside grilling, and driving his wife to run errands and visit shut-ins. Jack's wife, Irene, is a retired elementary school teacher. She sings in the choir, teaches the pre-k - 1st grade children's choir on Wednesday nights, and visits shut-ins and nursing home residents on a regular basis. She loves all aspects of her church involvement and schedules other activities carefully so as not to interfere with her weekly obligations to her congregation.

Jack often finds himself feeling guilty that he does not enjoy the church volunteer work that *should* be meaningful to him because it is important to the church. And some weeks, it is so draining to him that he is resentful and negative about being "overworked" as a volunteer, especially when he sees how happy Irene is when she is engaging in her volunteer activity. He enjoys driving the bus and helping with the building and grounds maintenance, but they often get overshadowed by his other committees.

1. Why do you think that two people at the same church could have such different feelings about their involvement?
2. What did you find most interesting or significant in this story?
3. Do you identify more with Jack or Irene? Why?
4. Why is now a good time for you to study/discuss the topic of calling? Write out your motivation for participating here:

Part 1: Why am I Here?

Calling in the Bible

God's call is a recurring theme throughout the Bible.

In the Old Testament, God called individuals to particular tasks like Noah and the building of the ark (Genesis 6:9 - 8:22). God called prophets like Amos (Amos 7:15) to speak truth to God's people. And God called leaders like Joseph, Saul, and David.

Perhaps one of the most notable call stories from the Old Testament is the story from Exodus 3:1-16 of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush on Mt. Horeb. During this encounter, God reveals God's name, and thus God's character, to Moses. "I am who I am," God says, which can be understood to mean, "I will be with and for my people in all times and places." God also used this encounter to call Moses, a flawed human, to lead God's people out of Egypt and to the Promised Land. What a task! Moses protests, but God tells him that the Israelites need deliverance and God will be with Moses each step of the way.

In 1 Samuel 3:1-10, God audibly calls Samuel by name but Samuel mistakes this calling, at first thinking it is Eli who is calling him. Eli was the one to affirm for Samuel that God was speaking so that Samuel could answer and receive the work of prophecy God had for him. We see later (v.19) that God was present with Samuel as he lived into his calling, just as God was present with Moses.

The New Testament is full of instances of calling as well. Mary encounters an angel who tells her God has chosen her to be the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38). Though the Gospels differ some in their accounts of Jesus calling the disciples, we know that he appointed 12 men to journey with him (Mark 1:16-20). Ananias was obedient when God called him to aid Saul (Acts 9:10-19) as he made the transformation from persecutor of Christians to vessel God would use to share the Good News with Jews and Gentiles alike.

While God has audibly spoken to some, God has also spoken through messengers and circumstances. Very few people today hear God's voice audibly, but many sense God calling as they consider the needs of the world or perhaps encounter others in everyday circumstances.

One thing that is common among calling stories from the Bible is that God is present with those whom God calls. In Exodus 31:1-10, God is clear about who should build the tabernacle and explicitly states that both of the men have specialized gifts which make them the best choice to serve in such a capacity. Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 also list "spiritual gifts" and particular areas that God uses to equip God's people for service in the world. We have both innate and learned skills and behaviors that make us ready to carry out the work to which God has called us, and we see how our Biblical ancestors are chosen, appointed, exhorted, encouraged, and recognized for service because of their skills and gifts.

Though the language is varied, if by "calling" we mean a direction for a person or people, it is a theme found throughout scripture. Perhaps it is no coincidence that "God's call and the world's cry make the same sound," for all of creation groans as we wait for redemption (Romans 8:23).

Part 1: Why am I Here?

Calling in the Bible

1. **Choose a call story from above and read it aloud.**

Discuss in your small group:

- What catches your attention in this story?
- How did God call this person/people?
- Did God use or speak through anyone else?

2. What does it mean to you to be called by God? Another way to phrase the question: What do you believe is your purpose? What is your greatest passion? What is your understanding of Christian calling?

3. What did you take from the summary of Calling in the Bible on the previous page?

4. Why is keeping a *Needs I See* list important for this study?

5. **List** 3-5 ways and places you have served in the church, in the community, or on your own:

Next, circle or star the experience above that brought you the most joy.

Then, in groups of 3, take turns sharing with your small group a short (2 minute) story or synopsis that made this position joyful. Observers/listeners should complete the *My Observation of You* sheet that notes your interpretation of the storyteller's interests, results, and personality strengths. When the storyteller is done, share your sheet with him/her. Continue until each person has shared.

Part 1: Why am I Here?

As a Child

**"For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well." Psalm 139: 13-14**

Directions: Please circle one choice for each statement listed below that best describes your interests and personality as a young child. Answer as if you're looking back and observing yourself.

A. Interests (a person's innate aptitude and natural inclination):

When this child is immersed in play, I see her/him drawn to:

1. Building something tangible
2. Persuading others to join
3. Analyzing and organizing objects and numbers
4. Inventing a new or better way

B. Results (what a person wants to have accomplished at the end of the day):

He/she appears to want to bring or create more:

1. Beauty: by being artistic, innovative, and creative
2. Happiness: by generating laughter and excitement
3. Order: by making things work better/more effectively
4. Action: by getting lots of things done quickly and leading

C. Personality Strengths (positive traits that show up consistently when we are at our best):

When this child is at her/his best, I would describe him/her as:

1. Practical, decisive, direct
2. Enthusiastic, competitive, flexible
3. Loyal, cooperative, cautious
4. Perceptive, reflective, insightful

D. Motivating Environment (the elements that support or aid us in being our best):

This child seems most motivated when he/she has:

1. Autonomy setting and achieving goals and lots of variety
2. Plenty to do and challenging problems to solve
3. Reflective time alone and freedom from constant social demands
4. Straightforward instruction and minimal interruptions and changes

Which of the elements you circled are still true today? How do these align with what others said about you in the previous exercise?

Consider this: If you were writing yourself a note about what you observe as your best skills, talents, and traits (that no one but you will ever read), what would you say?

Needs I See:

Part 2: Who am I?

Part 1 Review

Overview

The purpose of this session is to think about how your family members/close friends, places of service, and natural interests may help inform you as you consider the most meaningful uses of your time.

Discussion:

1. Share meaningful moments or observations from your *Needs I See* list.
2. Have you ever sensed God leading you toward a particular place of service? If so, describe your experience.

Part 2: Who am I?

Christian Service Tree

Directions: Complete the tree on the next page by labeling church or community volunteer positions of family members and/or close friends. You may sketch your own tree if you wish.

Consider this: What positions of family and friends do you find most interesting? These do not have to be persons who go to our church. As long as they are friends/family, it could be a position they have in their church or with a community partner. "Star" these and then see if there are similarities between the ones you found most interesting.

How has exposure to these influenced your own church involvement, volunteer work, and/or job choices?

Is there a volunteer position you have avoided because of someone else's experience in that role?

Is there something you wanted to try because someone else seemed to enjoy it so much?

As you complete this exercise, note if there is a leadership or volunteer position you are interested in learning more about. If so, who can you talk to in order to find out more about what the position entails?

In your small groups, share what you found most interesting about your tree or common themes you now see.

Christian Service Tree



Part 2: Who am I?

Subjects of Interest

Consider this: What language do you love to hear, speak, and/or be around? What words or phrases pique your interest? Are there any topics about which you have always been curious?

Directions: Complete the two exercises below to reveal more about what you are drawn to.

Just Hanging Out

Which group below would you instinctively be drawn to as "your kind of people?" Leaving aside any question of shyness, whom would you most enjoy being with for the longest time? Mark that group with a "1." Which of the remaining groups would you enjoy being with the most for the longest amount of time? Mark that group with a "2."

Next, circle the words or phrases in your choices that make you most enthused to spend time with these groups.

I like to hang out with people who talk about...

_____ How to grow plants and animals, raise and sell crops and livestock, protect the environment.

_____ How to keep a business running, marketing, sales and customer service, hiring and training workers, keeping track of money.

_____ Computer software/hardware, audio and video systems, online gaming.

_____ Architecture, construction, engineering. New ideas about manufacturing, transportation, and distribution. Mathematical equations.

_____ Ways to identify and treat injuries or disease and new ways to keep people healthy.

_____ New ideas about education/training, writing, publishing, and art.

_____ How government agencies or human service organizations work: how they help people, keep the public safe, enforce laws, and offer protection.

What 5 words summarize your subject matter interests? Write them here:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Part 2: Who am I?

Subjects of Interest (cont.)

If You Could

The questions below are designed to help you think about your interests and to aid you in identifying areas you might like to volunteer driven by your curiosity and passions. You may answer as many as you'd like.

1. If you were to produce a documentary film, what would the subject be?
2. If you were to start a non-profit organization, what services would it offer and/or who would it serve?
3. What local, societal, or world problems most interest you?

Now notice if any trends or themes appear throughout your list and/or if any organizations/non-profits come to mind as you look over your response(s). Write them here:

Take a look at your Ministry Style Report and mark 2-3 statements that are significant to you.

Needs I See:

Part 3: Where is My Place?

Part 2 Review

Overview:

The purpose of this session is to complete your *Intersections of Calling* page.

Discussion:

1. Discuss meaningful moments or observations from your *Needs I See* list.
2. Looking back at the exercises from Part 2, put a star next to those areas of interest you think best match your answers from the Just Hanging Out and If You Could exercises on the Areas of Interest page..
3. Take a look at the list of areas of service in your church and community found in the appendix. Are there non-profits/ministries in the community where members serve that are not listed there? If so, share these with the group.
6. Complete your *Intersections of Calling* page using the information you gained from the activities above. Share your page with a dialogue partner.

Part 3: Where is My Place?



Needs I See in the World:

Refer back to the lists/notes you've been keeping and "If I Could" exercise on p. 11

Background:

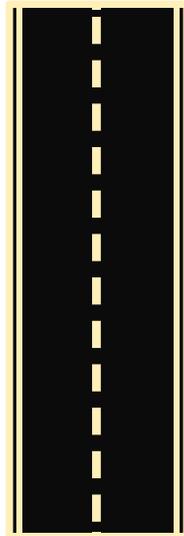
Refer back to Part 1, "Calling in the Bible" discussion question 4. These places of service are your background.



The circle in the middle of the Y reflects the fluidity of our callings and the ways these elements change during seasons of our lives. We do not come to a calling and stop, but live into it until we discern our next calling.

Gifts/Talents:

Refer back to page 4 question 4, page 5, and page 10



Potential Service Areas/Projects at My Church:

Potential Service Areas/Projects in the Community or Abroad:

Part 4: Finding My Most Meaningful Place of Service

Part 3 Review

Overview:

The purpose of this session to reflect on your experience in this study and share your *Intersections of Calling*.

Discussion:

1. In small groups of 3, share your *Intersections of Calling* with one another.

2. Re-visit these questions from Part 1:

a. What does it mean to you to be called by God?

Has your definition changed over the course of this study?

b. Why is it important to keep a *Needs I See* list?

What will you do to remain aware of these needs in the future?

3. Turn to the questions on the next page for deeper discussion and reflection.

4. Take a look at Next Steps, found in the Appendix on page 22.

Part 4: Finding My Most Meaningful Place of Service

Questions for Deeper Discussion & Reflection

1. Is there a place of service for you in the church or community? If not, why? If so, are there ministries you have not considered that might suit your gifts and interests?
2. Where are you currently serving the church? Does this role make the best use of your instincts, talents, and interests? Does this work bring you fulfillment? If not, what was your reason for serving in this position?
3. If you are not currently serving in the church or community in a volunteer capacity, why are you choosing not to?
4. What aspects of your life bring you meaning and purpose? If it is not your investment in church/volunteer work, what would need to change in order for you to find meaning and purpose in these activities?
5. Do you have a clearer sense of how God is calling you to serve your church, community, and world as a result of your participation in this study? Why or why not?
6. What are two things you will covenant to do in the next two months to live out your renewed sense of calling?

1.

2.

Appendix

Helpful Dialogue Tips

If you are talking:

Do



- Say what you think, feel, or have done without trying to defend it.
- Talk about yourself without worrying what the other person may think about you.

Don't



- *Do not* dwell on the past.
- *Do not* ask for advice from your dialogue partner now.
- *Do not* look for approval (or lack of approval) from your dialogue partner.

If you are listening:

Do



- Pay very careful attention to what your dialogue partner is saying.
- If you don't understand something that she/he has said, simply ask, "Can you say a little more about that?"
- Take notes. Read notes out loud, and then hand or send your notes to him/her.

Don't



- *Do not* interrupt.
- *Do not* give advice or appear to be an expert. In particular, refrain from saying, "Here's what I think you should do," or anything else that implies that you have *the* answer.

When you end your dialogue, the person listening may want to ask something like this:

- What do you plan to do with what we talked about here?
- Can I do anything to support you?

Appendix

Ministries & Other Places of Service in the Church

Appendix

Ministries & Other Places of Service in the Community

Appendix

Next Steps

You've spent a lot of time during this 4-part study thinking about needs you see in the world and how your instincts, interests, and gifts can help meet those needs in practical ways.

Hopefully during the course of this study you've also been thinking about how God *has* called you and *is* calling you. Perhaps God has called you through a "nudging" or a "still, small voice." Perhaps God has spoken to you through others in your life. We sometimes notice how God has worked in and through our lives when we see in retrospect the events and people who have led us to where we are now. Maybe you see how God has been calling you through different seasons of your life - to be a supportive friend, spouse, parent, co-worker, or caregiver. Maybe you have more clarity about how and where God is working in the world and you're eager to join that work.

So, what's next? We're glad you asked!

You have in the pages of this book a snapshot of how you see your deepest passion intersecting with the world's needs. Talk with your dialogue partner and set up a time a week or two from now when you can share your progress on how you're putting what you've learned into action. Make a plan to check in with one another occasionally and covenant to pray for one another.

Next, think about how you can make service in your areas of interest with your unique gifts a spiritual discipline that is live-giving and not energy-draining.

Last, remind yourself as often as is necessary that this is *one* way God is calling you. You may schedule time to serve with a ministry at church or volunteer at a non-profit and, after a few times of serving, your schedule might be de-railed by a sick child or parent, a crisis at work, or other obligations. Instead of seeing those as events that get in the way of your calling or feeling overcome with guilt, think about how God might be speaking to you in the needs that arise.

Also, remember that God's call is not limited to the time we spend volunteering in the church and community. God calls us as whole individuals. When you examine the various areas of your life other than church or volunteer work - work/career, close relationships, leisure time - do you have a sense of God's calling in these areas as well? It is integral to our identity as Christians to work to find God's purpose for us in the varied roles and places in which we find ourselves.

Life is calling. Every area and season of our lives is an opportunity for us to steward the person God created us to be.

Life *is* calling. God actively calls us to join God's work in the world each and every day if only we are careful to notice.

Life *is calling*. When we live into the unique call God has for our lives we discover a sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment that enables us to reflect something of the character of God back to the world.

May it be so.



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The Center for Congregational Resources (CCR) at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama has been helping clergy and congregations thrive for almost 15 years. Originally established with a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. and its Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Initiative, the CCR provides sabbatical leaves and peer learning for pastoral leaders and consultative services and resource strategists for congregations, among other enrichment activities. Such holistic support is an extension of Samford University's mission to nurture persons in their development of intellect, creativity, faith, and personhood.



In 2017, the CCR was awarded a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. as part of its Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose initiative. There are 13 participating organizations in this initiative exploring calling and vocation. The two overarching goals of the Lilly Endowment, Inc. in creating this initiative are: 1) deepen and enrich the lives of Christians by equipping them to discern and live out their callings more fully; and 2) enhance the vitality of congregations by developing new ministry models for inspiring and supporting the Christian calling of their members. The Life is Calling "Innovation Hub" used by our initiative includes sixteen churches representing six denominations.

For more information on the CCR and Life is Calling visit: www.samford.edu/congregational-resources



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This guide was developed by the Life is Calling team with the expertise of Michael Tate (Mike), President and CEO of On the Same Page Consulting and author of *The White Shirt*. Mr. Tate is also a consultant for Birkman International, "an industry-leading behavioral and occupational assessment company headquartered in Houston, Texas with an extensive global reach." We are proud to partner with Mr. Tate as we embark on the journey of discovery and discernment.

For more information on Michael Alan Tate visit: www.michaelalantate.com