

Statement of Call

I have always felt called to ministry – called to proclaim the gospel and change the world through Christian discipleship. A pastor's kid raised in the church, I have long had a deep love for theology, the subversive way of Jesus, and building transformative Christian community. The question for me has never been *if* I feel called to ministry, but *how* and *where* I am called to do it.

Initially, I thought I was called to do ministry as a professor in academia. I had what I would call my first spiritual awakening not in the church, but in an undergraduate theology classroom, where I discovered my passion for the scholarly study of scripture, theology, and philosophy. Indeed, my experience with academic theology was so positive that I went on to earn my Bachelor's degree, two Masters degrees, and a PhD in the field with hopes of landing a tenure track job at major university.

God, of course, had other plans. As much as I loved academic theology, it wasn't always good for me and I unfortunately developed an unhealthy relationship to it. Stuck in my head and disconnected from the world around me, an overly cerebral approach to the faith had turned God into an abstract idea - an intellectual problem to be solved or figured out. The result of this idolatrous behavior was not only isolation and despair, but a life-threatening battle with alcoholism that would eventually land me in rehab.

It was here, in a 35 day inpatient rehab facility, that I had my second spiritual awakening. Utterly powerless and forced to surrender, I stopped trying to figure God out and began to trust and depend on something bigger than my own understanding. God stopped being a theoretical idea and started becoming a personal and transformative experience. I began to find God not in books and theory, but in the brokenness of my humanity, vulnerable community, and in humble service to those who are suffering.

Transformed by this experience, I started to sense that God might not be calling me to the academic world of scholarship after all. I certainly still wanted to teach and do theology. But I also began praying for opportunities to pursue my passion for theology in more practical, experiential, and transformative contexts. Providentially, it was precisely at this moment that my wife's congregation (Covenant Presbyterian Church) was looking to hire a Director of Adult Education. I accepted the job and immediately began teaching Adult Bible Study, Sunday School, and Pub Theology. I instantly fell in love with the position. I felt at home. Here I had the opportunity to not only teach and do theology, but to do so in a confessional and relational community that was committed to living out the Christian faith rather than merely talking about it as an academic idea. This, I discovered, was the place that I was called to. I was called to the church rather than the academy - to Christian praxis, discipleship, and community building rather than the ivory tower of Christian scholarship and theory.

This newfound sense of call to the Church was confirmed in the next two ministry positions I would accept. Working with the Presbytery of Cincinnati, I started a campus ministry at UC (UKirk) and planted a New Worshipping Community called Third Way Peace Fellowship. Both of these positions, positions I am still pastoring at today, fully affirmed that God was indeed calling me to ministry through the Church. At UKirk, for example, I was still teaching and

working with college students. The goal of this teaching, however, was not merely to discuss the latest academic scholarship, but to use this scholarship to help young adults become passionate followers of Jesus in a post-modern, pluralistic, and secular world. Similarly, I continued to do theology at my New Worshipping Community. At Third Way, however, I quickly discovered that I not only wanted to teach theology, to proclaim the gospel in *word*, but to live it out in *deed* among the poor and marginalized. I felt called to build and lead Christ-centered discipleship communities committed to transforming the world through the nonviolent way of Jesus.

This is the God who called me into ministry. I believe that God is love (1 John 4:8), and that God is thereby ultimately found and experienced in works of justice, mercy, and peace (Matthew 25: 31-46). Fully revealed in the person and work of Jesus, I affirm an incarnational God who meets us not in abstract theory and ideas, but in the messiness of human experience, relationships, and community. And it is this God who I feel called to proclaim and worship among the covenant people of God as a minister of Word and Sacrament.

As I have suggested in this statement, I have always felt called to be a teacher, to “teach the faith in word and deed and equip the saints for the work of ministry (BOO G-2.0501).” I have long known that God has called me to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, “announcing the nearness of God’s Kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord’s favor upon all creation (BOO F-1.01).” What has changed in my story is that I now believe that God is calling me to do this not in the classroom, but in the community of faith, hope, and love that is the church, the body and presence of Christ on earth (BOO F-1.0301).