

**Bethany Stewart**  
**Statement of Call**  
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The pattern of life, death, and resurrection is central to the Christian story—the story of the God who calls. It’s not first a story about triumph, upward mobility, or rock-solid certainty, but a story about encountering an unshackled God *right in the midst* of the many types of deaths that characterize our lives in this world. Although I was raised on this story, learning to live it out has not come easily. I was raised in a very conservative, Southern Baptist, homeschooling family. And while I learned much of great value from my childhood, what I did not learn was what Richard Rohr calls “a spirituality for the second half of life,” which is a faith that accepts that “the way up is the way down.” The kind of faith that I internalized as a child was one that prioritized “safety” within a rigid system of doctrinal certainty—a system that taught me to think in terms of “us” and “them,” that taught me to fear “the Other.” At the heart of that fear of “the Other” was the idea of women in ministry as being the first, heretical step down that dreaded “slippery slope.” And so, while I was taught to embrace the sovereignty of God—a belief I still hold dear—I also absorbed the idea that this God was somehow contained within my particular brand of doctrine. I was taught on the one hand that God is free to act, but also that he is limited, and the one thing that he would never do was call a woman to preach or pastor.

In order to grow, I needed to leave home. So, when I was 21, I left home for the country of Taiwan. I spent 12 years there, teaching English as a second language. Initially, I went there thinking that *I* had things to teach *them*, but now I realize that I was mostly there to learn. I learned not to be threatened by other ways of being in the world, but instead to embrace and learn from “the Other.” I also learned, after getting married and finding out that my husband and I could not have biological children, just how God brings life out of death. From the *death* of infertility came the *new life* of adoption. From the *death* of my easy certainties about God and about “the Other” emerged a *new life* of faith—an openness, a willingness to be “led into mystery,” as John de Gruchy puts it. In Taiwan, I began to discover that faith is more about discipleship—about following Christ into the unknown—rather than about my controlling God by figuring him out. At that point, I found community in books—authors like Richard Rohr, Rachel Held Evans, N.T. Wright— but there were only one or two people I knew—including my husband—who had a similar experience of faith. On one side, family and friends back home were mostly still sticking to the familiar old paradigms that I had left. On the other side, friends I knew who had questioned their faith had left it altogether. I was very isolated. I was looking and praying for a community—a safe place to learn and re-learn discipleship, where I could both give and receive support. So when my husband and I moved from Taiwan back to Ohio in 2021, we began looking for a church.

The first church we walked into was The Bellbrook Presbyterian Church, pastored by Diane Ziegler, and from day one we knew that this was the place for us. And it was there that I began to experience another type of death and resurrection. Although I had deconstructed many of the beliefs I was raised with, and mentally I had accepted the possibility that women could preach or pastor, I had still never been part of a church where women’s voices were heard. The teaching that it is a dangerous act of rebellion for women to lead had soaked into me so thoroughly that when I experienced female leadership, it was uncomfortable for me at first. But if God had taught me anything in Taiwan, it was that I dare not limit him. And so, by his grace, I stayed through the discomfort. I did a lot of watching and listening, and what I saw was a culture where everyone—

women *and* men, young *and* old—had space to use their gifts. I began to realize that this culture was a reflection both of Presbyterian polity and of a woman in leadership who thoroughly embodies that polity. Diane uses her voice, but she does it in a way that helps others find theirs. Diane, and our church's Session, began giving me opportunities to use my voice, and as I did, a feeling started to creep up on me. It felt like something was coming for me. It was like that sensation you get when your fingers have been frozen and they are thawing out and starting to feel again. It was like something that had been hidden under the floorboards of my life was starting to emerge.

That feeling built and built for a few months, until one Sunday in November 2023, it became impossible to ignore. I went to the river near my house in Bellbrook, and I sensed a thought forming in my mind. I knew that if I let it materialize, it would change everything. I also knew that the God who calls was waiting for me to ask him to speak. God has never forced himself on me. So I asked him to speak, and for the courage to listen, and truthfully, I was not at all surprised by the thought that materialized: "What if I was always meant to be a pastor?" For me, to ask the question was to answer it. It was the only thing that made sense of my life, my gifts, my persistent love for the church even when I had been hurt by it. Parker Palmer says that vocation is something you "can't not do," and that is exactly how I feel about preaching and pastoring. And so, here I am, a year and a half into the process of pursuing ordination, a year and a half of seminary under my belt. Studying at Fuller Seminary has been a great gift, because Fuller is relentless about exposing students to different voices. At Fuller, I am hearing loud and clear, in every single class, "the voices of people long silenced," as the Brief Statement puts it, and has only deepened my love for the word of God, the people of God, the sacramental presence of God that cannot be contained within the boundaries of a system of doctrine that makes rules about who is and who is not allowed into a pulpit. Following this God is the only thing that makes sense of my life. It might be dangerous, and I am confident that it will never let me get comfortable, but it is also the only thing worth living for.