

# Call to ministry may be in a variety of vocations, hospital CEO insists\_32204

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## Call to ministry may be in a variety of vocations, hospital CEO insists

**By Marv Knox**

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DALLAS—God calls people into all kinds of professions; the challenge is to seek God's will and follow it, Joel Allison told a convocation audience at Dallas Baptist University.

Allison, president of Baylor Health Care System in Dallas, illustrated his point with his own life story: As a young man, he seemed headed for the pastorate or a mission field. But God led him into health care administration, which has been his ministry for three decades.

**"Wherever you're serving, if it's God's plan, it's a calling."**

—Joel Allison,  
president, Baylor  
Health Care System

Allison, the first member of his family to attend college, addressed the campus community on the morning he received an honorary doctor of humanities degree from DBU.

He enrolled in Baylor University in Waco during the mid-1960s on academic and athletic scholarships, majoring in religion and journalism.

“I had dedicated my life in high school to some type of Christian ministry, and I was trying to understand what particular area of Christian ministry God would want me to serve him in,” he said. “I tried daily to understand God's will for my life.”

But that understanding took an unexpected turn during his senior year, Allison reported.

Nearing the end of their collegiate careers, he and his wife, Diane, scheduled a visit to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, the next logical step toward becoming a pastor or a missionary.

But God used that trip to “raise more questions and doubts than affirmations,” he recalled, noting seminary administrators told him he “might” be admitted, they “might” get into seminary housing and she “might” be able to get a teaching job.

“We understand you have to have faith ... and with prayer, you can overcome barriers,” he said. Still, the tentative nature of every aspect of the trip caused them to pray for God's guidance and clarification.

They got it through a series of events.

First, he got close-up exposure to hospital life. His brother-in-law was participating in a family medical residency at John Peter Smith Hospital in Fort Worth. On weekend visits, Allison got to put on scrubs and make rounds.

“It was a wonderful experience for me,” he remembered. “It was such an unusual, different place. Hospitals are so alive from the busyness-24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

The next semester at Baylor, Allison took a photojournalism course and was required to shoot a photo essay. He chose “a day in the life of a medical resident” and immersed himself in the life of a hospital.

Not long after that, the Allisons traveled to Uvalde with her brother, who was completing his residency and thinking about joining a medical practice in South Texas.

During a tour of the hospital, Allison learned the incoming administrator had intended to minister in a church but felt God's leadership to minister by leading a hospital.

“At that moment—one of those defining moments—it really hit me: Maybe this is what I'm supposed to do,” he said.

The next Monday morning, he called Hillcrest Hospital, a Baptist facility in Waco, and both top administrators confirmed that they saw themselves engaged in a “ministry of healing.”

So, Allison took a fork in the road to ministry, following a direction that led him to Hendrick Medical Center, a Baptist hospital in Abilene, as well as to hospitals in Amarillo, Corpus Christi and St. Joseph, Mo.

He joined Baylor Health Care System as senior executive vice president and chief operating officer in 1993 and became president and CEO in 2000.

“This is a truly wonderful Christian organization that is governed by a tremendous board of trustees—Christian men and women who are committed to the mission and vision of Baylor, its commitment to patient care, community service, research and education, to be a healing ministry.”

Allison urged young people to consider ministering through health care, describing the doctors, nurses, technicians and administrators with whom he works:

“So many of them are there out of a sense of calling. They want to serve. They have chosen their life's work in a way of serving others to minister to those who come with specific needs.”

That sense of purpose and commitment can be reflected in many fields, as long as God leads, he added.

“Wherever you're serving, if it's God's plan, it's a calling,” he explained. “What we have is a challenge to be sure we are in God's will, that we are looking for that calling, that we are truly following his will for us.

“He has a plan for each of us. Our challenge is to be sure we find that plan.”

DBU President Gary Cook affirmed Allison as a role model for professional ministry.

“There are all sorts of ways to minister,” Cook told the convocation audience.

“God may call you to be a Christian lawyer, a Christian doctor, a Christian schoolteacher, a Christian business person. He called Joel Allison to be a Christian health care administrator.”

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