

Hearing the Call

September 14, 2007

Posted: 9/14/07

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Hearing God's call to vocational service may not be as easy in a Baptist church as it once was, but some congregations are determined to change that.

Once upon a time, a public invitation at the close of the sermon in many Baptist worship services routinely included an appeal to "surrender to God's call" to vocational ministry. Not so today. And unless trends are reversed, some observers fear a clergy shortage in years ahead.



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We have lost the theology of 'call' in many churches," said Paul Baxley, pastor of First Baptist Church in Henderson, N.C. "We need a recovery of the language of calling in the life of the church."

Sermons about vocation and calling have become “a more frequent part of the congregation’s diet” since Baxley arrived at Henderson, he noted. Even so, he hastened to add the church already took seriously its responsibility to help young people discern how God might want them to spend their lives.

As a part of that emphasis, Baxley and another minister on staff taught a class of high school seniors every Sunday during Lent last year, concluding with a weekend retreat where each young person was challenged to reflect on God’s plan for his or her life.

While Baxley was director of congregational ministries at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Va., he directed the Samuel Project—an initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment to explore the nature of vocational calling and to nurture a sense of calling among young people.

That initiative, in turn, helped to spark “The Choice” curriculum produced by Smyth & Helwys and Echo camps sponsored by Passport.

It also gave birth to church-based initiatives to “call out the called,” such as the YourCall program for high school-aged teenagers developed by Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas.

Young people at Wilshire can apply for YourCall in the ninth grade, indicating their commitment to the four-year process. Participants are mentored by a mature Christian in the church, learn about various aspects of the Christian life and become involved in ministry and missions.

Students read and study units on worship, Christian ethics, church history and various biblical topics. Teens in the program are expected to post an entry on the YourCall weblog at least once a week, gather with other students in the program one Saturday morning each month, meet with Pastor George Mason once a quarter and stay in frequent, regular contact with their mentors.

YourCall is designed to engage students in an ongoing, serious conversation about their life's work, Mason explained.

"We want to help young people to be able to discuss vocation spiritually and not just offer a default response based on the expectations of culture or family," he said.

Part of that process is helping students recognize their giftedness in areas such as listening, caring, communicating and leading others. Another aspect involves talking to teenagers about those things that matter most to them.

"What do they feel burdened about? What really sticks in their craw and makes them feel dissatisfaction with the way the world is?" Mason asked, illustrating the kinds of questions that students explore.

Both First Baptist Church in Dalton, Ga., and Zebulon Baptist Church in Zebulon, N.C., have adapted the Samuel Project to their congregations.

The project is based on the Old Testament example of Samuel, who heard God's call to become a prophet; his mother, Hannah, who dedicated her son to God before he was born; and Eli, the priest with whom Samuel lived and from whom he learned what it meant to be God's servant.

The approach involves inviting young people to be a "Samuel" who will agree to let God guide in vocational decision-making, encouraging each parent to be a "Hannah" who will encourage a child to be sensitive to God's direction and enlisting adult mentors to serve as an "Eli" for a Christian teen.

At First Baptist in Dalton, Pastor Bill Wilson tries to help create a culture of calling by speaking of it in fresh language to which young people seem to respond.

“We have just about rubbed ‘God’s will’ smooth,” Wilson said. “I don’t talk about God’s will as much as I talk about God’s dream. I challenge young people to discover the dream God has (for his or her life), to follow the dream and to live the dream.”

As young people in the church grow comfortable talking about the stewardship of gifts and talents and ask informed questions about how to make vocational choices, Wilson has observed it creates a contagious excitement in the congregation.

“A lot of adults are coming around and asking, ‘Is it too late for me to get in on that?’” he said.

Zebulon Baptist Church seeks to teach young people that they will be able to discern God’s call best when they develop spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, devotional reading, journaling and silent reflection.

“Our young people have responded to the invitation to silence—to be able to disconnect from all the noise in their lives,” Pastor Jack Glasgow said.

Students are less likely to be receptive to God’s call if they see conflict and stress at church and know ministers who are unhappy in their positions, some pastors noted.

“I suspect a lot of young people have been turned off by professionals who have tended to emphasize the negative aspects of ministry,” Baxley observed.

Baptist teens and young adults also have grown up in an environment that has focused on denominational controversy and division, he added.

On the other hand, young people are more open to listening to a call to vocational ministry when they see role models who find fulfillment by serving a church, Glasgow noted. He has been at Zebulon Baptist 30

years—four years as youth minister and 26 as pastor.

“It’s a great life of ministry, serving a church like this. It’s very positive,” he said.

But several pastors stressed their churches emphasize God is interested in the vocation of all his children—not just those who end up serving on a church staff.

A “call-friendly” culture “doesn’t mean everybody has to walk the aisle and become a preacher,” Wilson stressed. “We validate that (vocational) ministry is part of God’s call, but it’s not all of it.”

When children or young teenagers make a public commitment to vocational Christian service, churches have to walk a fine line, Glasgow added.

“We want to affirm those who express a sense of calling at a young age. At the same time, we try to give them wide boundaries about what that means so they don’t feel like a failure later if they go a different direction,” he said.

“We want them to understand it’s a journey. We encourage them to keep their options open and look at a variety of ways they can be used by God.”