



# minister

## MAGAZINE

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## Our Sense of Call

### Relishing the Call to Chaplaincy

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In 1969, as a high school senior, I was applying to colleges. I had always known that whatever vocation I pursued, it would involve helping people; I just never knew what direction that passion would take. For women back then, the normal post high school route was wife and mom, K-12 teacher or nurse. None of those options felt right to me. Fortunately my dad was ahead of his time and he encouraged me to follow my heart, even if it wasn't culturally normal. I went to college with my plan to be a married social worker with 2-3 children, a dog, and a house with a white picket fence.

The Vietnam War colored my college experiences. As an original "Hippie Flower-child," my sense of justice and fairness led me to join in the campus protests against the war and the draft. Little did I know that my future first husband's lost draft deferment would be the impetus to hear God calling me to serve him professionally! We married right after we graduated college and he joined the Air Force to fly rather than be drafted into the Army Infantry. I prayed to find something meaningful to do with my degree and life as I followed him around in the Air Force.

As we moved from training base to base I tried several options and did volunteer work as a physical therapist. I explored joining the Air Force as social worker or physical therapist, but the more serious I got about a vocation, the more God seemed to be drawing me to his ministry—and in unexpected and spectacular ways.

I had always been active in my Baptist church until college and the war caused me to try to "go it alone" without the Lord. My first husband was not a believer when we married and it was not a concern of mine until he joined the Air Force and ruined my fairy-tale plans.

As I struggled to find purpose for myself vocationally and make sense out of the war and the military as a Christian, it brought me back to the Lord. Imagine my surprise when my non-believing husband brought up the idea of me being a military chaplain "since you can't separate yourself from this Christian thing." My first response was, "Don't be crazy; women can't be ministers or chaplains!" I suspect God laughed at that because he began chasing me 24 hours a day.

It was not my faith experience or learned theology at the time, but God began to "badger" me through dreams. All I can do is testify that he sent me dreams, day and night for weeks, which showed me ministering as a chaplain. I saw myself preaching, teaching, counseling, marrying, baptizing and burying as a chaplain in both US and international settings. I was so confused and upset that I would try to shake these dreams as if they were nightmares, but it was like God was showing me a video and would push "pause" till I was ready to watch again. I kept telling God to "read your own book! It's you who says

women can't be pastors!"

To make matters worse, my husband made appointments for me to talk to the senior chaplain about becoming a chaplain, since he was seeing us as a two-paycheck couple. I skipped the first two appointments he set up for me so he picked me up and took me to the third one. Had I made the first meetings, I would have spoken to a Catholic priest, but the third meeting was with the new senior chaplain—an ABCUSA chaplain! My intent was to go in and say "I think I am supposed to be a chaplain." I expected, and hoped, he would tell me that women couldn't do that and then I would go with my plan to join the Air Force as a physical therapist or social worker. Instead he got so excited that he called Valley Forge to find out what I needed to do.

I was even more confused, but I agreed to read the scripture aloud at our desert outdoor Easter sunrise service. As I was reading the text where Jesus sends the women back to the male disciples to tell them He is risen, it was as if God was teasing me personally and saying, "So, isn't that the Gospel message? And it was I who told the women to go tell the men." So much for my excuse about women not being allowed to preach!

After everyone left, I sat in the sand under the empty cross and sobbed as I told God "my demands" and "put a fleece before the Lord." I would go forward with the work to become a chaplain *if* He would get my local church to agree to sponsor me, get me accepted into an SBC seminary (the only seminary near the Air Force fighter base) and get my husband assigned to that base. Still I was hoping God wouldn't come through with his end of the bargain.

But in the end, my local church and my pastor said they had known of my call to ministry since I was a pre-teen, I was accepted at that SBC seminary as one of only four women in the MDiv program, and my husband got the only open flying assignment. At that point I said yes to this miraculous call to ministry — specifically the military chaplaincy — and never looked back. Not bad for an idealistic hippie from the Vietnam era!

I loved my ministry to the military personnel and the way the military expanded my world view and culture. I've had so many awesome opportunities to minister in so many creative ways and places. Many of those original dreams from God came back to be as *déjà vu* when I found myself in the places I had dreamt of doing what God wanted me to do for him, but it was not an easy call—as most calls are not always easy. It had taken me so long to hear and accept the call to chaplaincy, it never occurred to me that I was doing something that was so non-traditional—joining the double male world of religion and the military.

### **The Ministers Council Provides a Community for its Members:**

- To assume responsibility for the faithful practice of the ministerial calling;
- To develop and promote ethical standards that both guide and shape the way in which the vocation of ministry is performed;
- To assume personal responsibility for and to encourage physical and emotional well-being in the practice of ministry;
- To inform, support and encourage one another in the deepening of personal and communal spiritual life;
- To work together to develop the skills necessary to become effective servants of Christ's church
- To encourage growing friendships that inform and correct the leader as she or he seeks to faithfully respond to the call of God in Christ Jesus.



### **The Ministers Council is that Unique Place within the National Structure of the ABCUSA which:**

- Offers leaders opportunities to articulate a distinct ministerial viewpoint, among the many denominational perspectives that need to be voiced and heard, as we work together for the growth of Christ's kingdom;
- Serves as an advocate for its members in times of difficulty and conflict;
- Is solely focused on the well-being of clergy as they engage in the ministerial calling in all of its dimensions.

[www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org)

As the seventh woman chaplain it was often hard and lonely working for and with some male chaplains who thought I had no right to be a chaplain. It hurt when parishioners I had pastored through a crisis asked the male chaplain to dedicate their baby, when a junior chaplain said he was not theologically able to work for a woman, when I could only supervise the Sunday School and women's group or when my performance report was downgraded simply because I was a divorced woman at that time or I had a "professionally jealous" supervisor. Yet it was these hard and hurtful times that God used to strengthen my belief in my calling even more than in the fun, joyful and professionally successful times. I remember a journal entry I wrote where I said, "Ministry was a way of being for me. I would be doing it if I never had the title or a paycheck since I could easier stop breathing."

I always expected that if I could last in the military long enough to retire at 20 years, that would be the end of my "calling" and I would begin a life of travel and volunteer work. Once again God had other ideas for me as I "fell" into a job as a seminary professor responsible for a chaplaincy program I was asked to create and run. This for one who was easily bored after three years of the same thing and who promised never to be a teacher.

I am now in my 12th year of teaching and feel like God has rewarded me for following his leading and being obedient and faithful in the tough times of ministry. My students have renewed my passion for ministry as I have watched them struggle with their own calling, find joy in their learning and confidence in their gifting. I take great joy in helping them discern and claim their call, as well as sending them into the often "foreign lands" of their calling. As I stand at graduation and help launch them into their future ministry, it occurs to me that I am still ministering, but now through those that I have taught, encouraged and mentored.

So what have I learned about a call to ministry? There is no "cookie cutter" form to a call. Some hear the call as youth, some at the beginning of a vocational life, some after other vocations. Sometimes it is a clear, direct message, sometimes it takes a circular route and requires much discernment. It can be a clear call to one particular form of ministry, a more non-specific call to care for others, or one that changes over the course of years. It can come in the form of a Damascus Road or a burning bush experience or through dreams that feel like nightmares just as easily as it can through the reading of the Word, a sermon or another's comment. I do believe it takes eyes and ears of faith to see and hear the calling and that it must and will be validated by other believers, the Word of God and experiences. It often seems that a call is manifest when one is not looking for it and often

not even wanting it—as in "send Aaron." It is not often easy to answer that calling, but it is incredibly rewarding to share one's first love (the Lord) with others and help them heal and grow as they come closer to being the person God intends them to be.

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You are eligible for membership if you are either

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- commissioned • a lay professional or
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- eligible for inclusion in the

Directory of Professional Church Leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA and serving an American Baptist Church or auxilliary organization

- paying dues through a constituent council or to the National Office of the Ministers Council

Join the Ministers Council through your local constituent council. Contact information is posted on the web at [www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org) under the "Who We Are" link.

## mission

The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches USA. We are working together to:

- Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry groups and Communities of Practice
- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional relations
- Resource ministry through our web site at [www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org)
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination, and to our local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means of expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling

