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Our Sense of Call

A Culture of Call: the Calling of All God's People

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A fully engaged culture of call in ministry is vital to the life of the ABC. This is a most significant call as a denomination—a call to greater discipleship ministry through the work of cultivating an environment that creates a space for persons to notice, name and be nurtured in the claim and call of God on their lives. As Karl Barth has stated, “all believers are called at baptism ... some are given a specific call to be clerics (ordained) who then become leaders of leaders. But all are leaders.”

Over the past thirty or so years we have seen both a decline in younger people entering ministry, challenges in future leadership for the church, and drastic changes in seminary education in the traditional MDiv programs. Yet colleges and universities are recognizing a generation of students who are much more service minded, more focused on living and leading lives that matter, who are faith-attuned and exploring their spirituality, and who are inclined to dedicate themselves as Christians serving in “faith-based” organizations. Is the church one of those places of calling? I believe it is.

Several months ago a few American Baptist leaders were invited to an informal exploratory conversation on cultivating a culture of call within the ABC. The conversation was initially stimulated by a think piece document that was a very early vision of how American Baptists as a calling church would address the growing need for a new generation of leaders in ministry in the ABC. Subsequently, two conference calls have been held — sponsored by the Ministers Council — with the second call involving even more participants from among denominational and regional leaders, key seminary leaders, persons engaged in ministry counseling, local church pastors, and retired ministers. A social network hosts the conversation online and has posts of related websites, articles, books, blogs, and discussion forums. Membership can be requested by going to the web site www.cultureofcall.ning.com.

Of the several recommendations in a 2001 Alban Institute Special Report — *The Leadership Situation Facing Congregations* — one prompted a major program and financial effort from the Lilly Endowment that resulted in the funding of 88 colleges and universities through Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation. That recommendation states, “Major attention must be given to recruiting the next generation of leaders. Special efforts must be made to reach young people with compelling images of the leadership challenges and opportunities awaiting them in congregational life. Great attention must be paid to removing the systemic barriers that discourage their consideration of such roles.”

Lilly's vision, started in 2001, seeks to foster a new generation of faith leaders in the church and society. They hope to look ten to fifteen years into

the future and identify a significant number of younger people who will assume roles in the pulpit, and other vital ministries of the church and in society, as principled leaders.

Joe Kutter once stated, “The question is not whether God is calling the leadership that is needed for the ministries of Christ; God is. The question is whether the church is prepared to nurture women and men to recognize and respond to that call.” The question is, how do we, as a denominational family, join with the work of God in calling out and raising a generation of believers in Christ whom we support in noticing and naming their call? How are we (local churches, regions, denominational ministries, camps, colleges, and seminaries) strategically positioned, right now, to be collectively used by God to help persons in the discernment process, claim their gifts, and be nurtured to fulfill that call in the world, and yes, within American Baptist churches, institutions, organizations, and agencies as well as partner institutions?

Frankly speaking, many analysts have purported that the present church, i.e. the traditional church, is not the church that can attract and sustain the leadership of this next generation — for a variety of reasons that present barriers.

The Alban Institute report acknowledges an urgent need for change, stating that, “The challenge before us in a time of sea change is to shift from the preoccupation with institutional problem-solving to a new commitment to capturing people’s imagination and providing wellsprings of hope. To make this shift requires a new calling of leaders, a new training of leaders, and a new supporting of leaders, both clergy and lay, who can stand with poise and fidelity in both the crisis and ferment of this great sea change.”

In regards to the calling of lay leaders, remember the work of Jitsuo Morikawa. (I love to draw upon our American Baptist history. It informs our present by considering our past.) Morikawa said of vocation and calling, “Ministry is the vocation and purpose in which the whole human race is constituted and called: every life born into the world, every family and institution, every people and race and nation. Life is literally ministry.” As I have attempted to understand his thinking, identifying the calling of all Christians to live their faith in the vineyard through ministries was job one. I must acknowledge that there are others who worked more closely with him and were his contemporaries. They might be better positioned to speak more clearly of his work. But I still find great inspiration in the calling of the laity work of Morikawa and his co-worker Richard Broholm, both of whom were once National Ministries staff leaders. The ministry of these two led to their work

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



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

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- 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.

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with Andover Newton Theological Seminary, where they established the Center for the Ministry of the Laity.

Jitsuo Morikawa believed deeply that American Baptists had a unique contribution to make in empowering laity for ministry. In a letter written only a few months before he died he reflected on the mission of the national agencies of the ABC. He wrote, "Because of our smallness and hence flexibility we have less to lose. We should identify a 'driving force,' a singular unique, most urgently needed missionary-evangelistic spearpoint around which our total resources must be focused. That spearpoint or driving force in my judgment is the ministry of laity in the institutions of our society. It should be informed by a theology of accountability, to transform institutions to fulfill their true vocation and calling, namely, to serve the common good. There is no question that this is the urgent, most critical mission of the Church today and in the years ahead."

The calling of all of God's people, those who would be ordained leaders and lay leaders, presses upon us to cultivate an environment which expects that persons are being called by God and will answer that call when nurtured and supported to do so. So allow me to share a few *what-ifs*.

What if we were driven by a vision that stands upon the truth that God does call each believer to ministry in the church, in the workplace and marketplace of our society and world?

What if the impact of our effectiveness in developing a strong culture of call resulted in greater disciple-making and deeper discipleship, steeped in an American Baptist identity of mission and ministry?

What if this culture furthered connections with our American Baptist colleges, universities and seminaries to educate and train students through formative experiences that engage their unique calling, and support their full placement in American Baptist churches, home mission centers, and global missions, so they would become leaders in educational, corporate, and governmental units at all levels?

It would result in American Baptists equipped to serve as the hands and feet of Christ, every day and everywhere. The culture of call conversation is action in the ABC-USA. American Baptists are rich in ministerial, educational and programmatic resources that are already in our hands, ready to be leveraged through a culture of call.

I look forward to continuing this conversation in order to find out what others are doing to effectively cultivate a culture of call, and to discovering best practices that are being experienced by local churches, in regional

programming, and with our educational partners.

How can we in ABC agencies better coordinate our efforts to maximize the results and the benefits of all we do? What is the real role of the seminaries as they work with local churches to help young people engage in various forms of ministry? Women in ministry are ready. How do we cultivate a more open environment for the placement of women into the ministry areas for which they have been gifted and called?

As one person commented during the last conference call conversation, "the goal is not to reinvent the wheel but to discover what American Baptist churches and organizations are already doing in this area to better coordinate and leverage their efforts to increase the numbers of American Baptist leaders in the pipeline. This is our collective work for the sake of the Kingdom. It is in our heritage to respond to God's calling of all God's people.

Trinette V. McCray is a former president of the ABC-USA, the first clergywoman so elected. Currently she is the President of the American Baptist Historical Society and serves on the General Board. Trinette lives in Milwaukee and is the Executive Director of the Center for Calling and Engagement at Cardinal Stritch University.





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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
- 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

