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## The Ministry of Teaching

*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. (1 Cor. 12:27–28)*

You've said yes! As the reality sinks in, you begin to wonder—what have I done? How could I possibly have thought I could do this? I can't be a teacher. I don't know enough, this is too awesome a task, and I don't have anything to offer these children (or youth, or adults). What was I thinking?

Let me invite you to ponder with me this calling as a teacher. You are right—it is an awesome task! It is an important and vital ministry in the community of faith. This has been true throughout the history of the Christian movement. One of the most important titles given to Jesus was that of teacher. The gospels refer to him forty-eight times as *didaskalos*, or teacher. However, the call to teach did not stop with him. Jesus

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called the disciples and sent them out to teach and proclaim the good news. Also, the apostle Paul regularly talked about teaching as a vital gift in the early church's life.

Why is teaching so central to the church's life? For me, one of the earliest stories told about the church's beginnings reveals the answer to this question. In this story, a newly appointed leader of the church, Philip, encounters an Ethiopian eunuch on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza. As told in Acts 8:26–40, Philip comes upon the eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah and asks him if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch's reply, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" clearly expresses the reason why the church needs those who teach. How can any of us understand what it means to be a Christian and to follow Christ unless someone guides and nurtures us in our faith and belief? Your call to teach is a call to step out in faith as a guide for those who seek to know and understand.

Okay, you say, you can see that this is vital and important work in the church. We won't have a future as a church if we are not guiding and nurturing each new generation. But what about these terms, *calling* and *ministry*? What do we mean when we affirm that teaching is a calling and a ministry in the church? Aren't pastors the only ones who are called and who are in ministry? Certainly you've said yes to being a teacher, but in your mind this is just a job in the church that needs to be done. You do like working with children, youth, or adults, or maybe you are a teacher by profession, but you didn't really think of this as a calling or ministry of the church when you agreed to do it.

What do we mean when we say that teaching is a calling and a ministry of the church? Why is it important to see the work of a teacher from this perspective? What do we discover about the importance of this work when we frame it in this way?

### **Teaching as a Calling**

My belief that our work as teachers in the church is a calling begins with a basic and profound theological statement: God calls. The God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is a calling God. We see this in the opening pages of the Old Testament, where God literally speaks and calls the world into being. This act of calling continues in the covenant created with the Israelites as the chosen people. As Sara Covin Juengst reminds us:

Being called was a part of the covenant relationship. To be an Israelite meant to be subject to that call. The covenant was more than just a contract, an exchange of goods or services; God's people were more than just "hired hands," who would serve God in return for God's protection and favor. God called, and the people responded to that call not out of duty, but out of a sense of unity and belonging. They were called to be God's people.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember, too, that the call was to all the people, not just to a few select leaders.

The image of God as one who calls does not end with the Old Testament but can be seen throughout the New Testament as well. Jesus, at his baptism, heard the call and claim of God on his life. As one who manifested the nature of God in his very being, Jesus' own ministry was a calling ministry, one that began with a call to the disciples to come and serve and continued throughout his life on earth and beyond as he called and continues to call those who meet him to new life and hope.

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<sup>1</sup>Sara Covin Juengst, *Equipping the Saints: Teacher Training in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 20.

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The understanding of God as one who calls is also seen as foundational in the early church. It is evident that the early Christian community understood itself as called into being by God through Jesus Christ, called to be Christ's body and presence in the world. Paul reminded the Ephesians of this as he urged them "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1). It is worth noting that the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, literally means a gathering of citizens called out. At the heart of the Christian faith is a belief that God calls us out and asks us to join in God's ongoing creative and redemptive work in the world.

As members of the church, we are part of the body of Christ. We have a place and a task in that body. Our positive response to the invitation to teach is an expression of our willingness to hear and accept God's call and to participate in the larger ministry of the church. Teaching is not just an extra job we've taken on or an additional time commitment we've made. It is a way of expressing our commitment and loyalty to the One who created us, redeemed us, and now calls us. We need to see our service as teachers in the church not as a duty we engage out of guilt or as a burden we must bear but as truly a call from God.

Our use of the word *calling* with regards to teaching in the church also helps us to remember who is really in charge. While the invitation to be a teacher generally comes through others, our faith says that it is God who is asking us to give of ourselves in this vital work of the church. God is the initiator, inviting us to join in God's life and work in the world. This is what a call to teach is all about—saying yes to God's invitation to join in the life of the church, to help pass on the stories of our faith, and to help create openings in people's lives in order that they might come to see and know God who is calling them, too.

### **Teaching as a Ministry**

Donald Griggs boldly claims that teaching is the church's first ministry.<sup>2</sup> While I believe that the church's first ministry is to worship and praise God, it is clear to me that the ministry of teaching is at the heart of worship and praise. How do we know what worship and praise mean and how to do that appropriately unless we are taught? Teaching is indeed a vital ministry of the church.

But you may be struggling with seeing your teaching as a "ministry," or yourself as a "minister." It is ironic that Protestants—especially my denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—place much emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, yet we act as though the only ministers are those who are ordained. In my experience, most laypeople when asked if they are called to some ministry of the church will usually respond with, "Oh, no. I'm not a minister. I'm just a layperson."

I want to challenge that perspective and remind us that our call to ministry comes not through the act of ordination but through our baptism. It is in baptism that we accept God's claim on our lives and take on the name of Christian—Christ's ones. With that commitment comes the responsibility to work and serve in and on behalf of the body of Christ. Saying "yes" to teaching in the church is saying "yes" to being in ministry.

An important question to ask at this point, then, is: What does it mean to call something a ministry? What is "ministry"? Why is it helpful to see teaching as a ministry rather than just as another job in the church?

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<sup>2</sup>Donald Griggs, *Teaching Today's Teachers to Teach* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 13.

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We have some clues as to what ministry means when we think about how we use the word. In religious circles, when we talk about *ministry* we generally link it with the word *service*. We talk about someone “serving” in ministry and that ministers are called to “serve.” We also use the term in another way and we can see this in the wider social context. In government, especially in countries other than the United States, we often hear the word *ministry* used in reference to a government office and the head of that office is seen as a minister who “represents” the government. For example, a Minister of Agriculture is seen as the representative of government who is responsible for functions related to the agricultural needs of the country. If we put these two perspectives together, we arrive at an understanding that ministry has to do with serving and representing. The work of ministry is to serve and to represent.

When we think of teaching as a *ministry* of the church, we remember that in the midst of our tasks of sharing information, telling stories, and passing on the tradition, we are called to serve and care for those whom we teach. Our students are not objects that we fill with knowledge, but people who need to know they are loved and that they matter to us and to God. We not only talk about God’s love and care but we model it in our own actions. We model in many ways, from the hospitality reflected in having our classrooms clean, prepared, and ready when our students arrive, to the caring attention revealed in knowing something about them, their lives and interests, to the concern expressed when someone is absent from a session. One of the saddest things I have heard a Sunday school teacher say is that so and so hasn’t been in class for several weeks but she doesn’t know why. A simple call to find out how the student is and saying we missed you is an important act of service that any teacher can do.

Understanding our teaching as ministry also helps us remember that we are there on behalf of the church, the body of Christ. We are Christ's representatives when we enter that classroom. As teachers, we are called to be what Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster call "Godbearers,"<sup>3</sup> those who incarnate God's love and who witness to the work of God in their own lives. It isn't about knowing it all or being an expert on the Bible and our faith tradition. It is about bearing witness to the love and grace of God that we have experienced in our own lives. Serving and representing—such is the ministry of teaching!

### **Summary**

My goal in these brief pages has been to help you see your work of teaching as a calling and a ministry that is vital to the church. It still may feel like a challenging and daunting task, and so it should. You have taken on a responsibility of great importance to the body of Christ, and sometimes it can feel like a demanding, frustrating, and thankless job. There are times in the church when we behave like some of the lepers described in Luke 17:11–19. Ten lepers came to Jesus for healing and he healed them all. But only one returned to say thanks. In the church, we, too, forget to say thank you to those who guide and serve and care for us through the ministry of teaching.

Not all of us will burn with passion for the task. It seems like God uses us in spite of ourselves. But, as I pointed out in the Introduction, this is not new. God's call has often been met with resistance and doubt as to whether one has the ability to do it. The amazing thing is that God keeps calling ordinary people like you and me, and ordinary people continue to respond in faith.

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<sup>3</sup>Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998).

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If you like to learn, place a high value on teaching and learning, care about people and enjoy being with them, and trust that God in Christ will be with you on the journey, the ministry of teaching can be an exciting, challenging, growing, and fulfilling task. Most importantly of all, God does not expect perfection, that you can be all things to all people, know everything, and know how to do everything. No, all that God asks of us is faithfulness. Out of our faithfulness comes hope for the future of the church.

#### **Further Reflection**

1. What led you to say “yes” to teaching? In what ways do you see God at work in this?
2. On a continuum of 1 to 10, with 1 representing “not at all” and 10 representing “totally,” rank yourself in terms of how much you feel “called” to teach. Using the same continuum, rank yourself in terms of how clearly you see your teaching as ministry.
3. What difference does it make to think about yourself as called to teach? What difference does it make to think about your teaching as a ministry?
4. How has the church helped you understand and claim teaching as a calling and a ministry? What more might it do?