

START NOW!

Regardless of whether we think that ministry is an option, most of us yearn for a life with meaning and purpose. Especially when we linger in awareness of that desire, but not only then, a new interest or vision may peek out from within our souls. Those are moments when, however briefly, we catch glimpses of the “something more” we seek. We begin to recognize that movement on our part is required if those yearnings are to be satisfied. Whether you are considering a move toward ministry or merely trying to get your life together, God is not absent from those stirrings and deliberations.

When God lays a call on our hearts, it seldom disappears until we address it adequately. It burns like a blazing fire. Like smoldering embers, it refuses to die easily and sears a permanent mark on our hearts. The call weighs on the conscience, like a burden carried without the option of delegating it to anyone else. When considered and responded to with appropriate discernment, the call settles into the depths of our being and begins to shape how we order our lives and devote our energy. It invigorates us because faithfulness to calls and leadings creates some of the most authentic moments we will ever know. They induce the kind of rejuvenation that is inevitable when our values, heart, and faith are in alignment, attuned with the purposes of the Divine. In its simplest explanation, that is what faithful living is; in its more intense or complex manifestations, this is ministry at its finest.

If you only retain one thing from reading the previous chapters, let it be that call and discernment are more than merely matters of concern in the life of the formally religious. It is not the exclusive property of those whose sights are set on the work of the clergy. Friends’ embrace of universal ministry and sacramental living alters the landscape of spiritual practice and faithfulness. An invitation is extended to every person to acknowledge and nurture a relationship with the Divine. God calls and gifts each one so that we may contribute to our life together in meaningful ways, large and small. Every moment is ripe with potential for revelation, inspiration, and ministry. This is equally true in times of

joy and sorrow, in celebration and devastation. Where God is present, hope is possible and opportunities for service abound. Add to that mix a spiritual formation that cultivates an interior dialogue with the Spirit and the stage is set for an approach to life in which nudges and leadings are common. Divine guidance becomes a regular feature of our days, as does a sense of accompaniment. As it turns out, the world is our meetinghouse and all creation is part of our community where we both offer and receive ministry. The sooner we recognize this truth and live accordingly, the quicker we can become frequent contributors to the Spirit's movement among us. The more widely this is embraced, the greater the probability that significant healing and transformation of the world's brokenness will occur.

Becoming comfortable with recognizing call and the ensuing discernment that follows is priceless in coping with the thunderbolt moments that change the course of one's life. We don't have to face those choices alone. We don't make these decisions in a vacuum. Supportive conversation partners complement the work of the Spirit, sometimes being the very vessels through which we receive our most useful guidance.

While some calls are larger than life, not all are of such a disruptive nature. Competency with call and discernment strengthens our readiness to cope with the smaller moments as well. Even if the call is gentle and seemingly minor, never underestimate the value of timely ministry. When cultivated and practiced with regularity, recognizing call and discerning next steps become reliable and trusted components of faithful living. It helps identify priorities. It grants permission to release other commitments that contribute to a cluttered, frenetic pace that keeps us ever occupied but seldom fulfilled, and even wildly out of alignment with our purpose and passion. In many cases, call and discernment will liberate us from chaos and guilt as we focus on the paths that are ours to travel and the work that is ours to do.

If, as suggested earlier, spirituality is rightly understood as "lived faith," perhaps ministry is better understood as "faith lived with purpose." This purposeful approach is a by-product of attention and intention. Attention to the nudge, the still small voice, the inner stirring, the voices from the community; intention to act with courage and confidence on the clarity that emerges as we listen and test our

calling, particularly as confidence grows in our ability to accurately discern and interpret next steps.

Ministry that arises from call and discernment is always more art than science, so outlining a few sure-fire steps to clarity is not a method I could offer with integrity. I can describe foundations, sketch horizons, and imagine trajectories; and that is what I have attempted in this book. The certain step that can be named and recommended is to start now! Wherever you are, simply begin. Listen. Wait. When the leading is recognized, step into the fire. Wade into the water. Immerse yourself and marinate in the mix of questions, excitement, fear, and service.

Individually the subjects addressed in the preceding chapters invited you to consider resources, nuances, and perspectives that support our efforts to acknowledge the presence of a call. Having become familiar with them, any of us can learn to utilize these resources to help us hear God's call and align our life with the things we most value.

Collectively, the chapters suggest a perspective that is rooted in some of Quakerism's key points of view. They keep us grounded in a tradition filled with wisdom discerned by others, but also dare us to have the courage to consider deeply our own experience with the Divine. What if, in fact, God chooses to do a new thing? How will we know if we are not paying attention? That is the only way faith remains a living force rather than reducing to an antiquated relic best suited for a museum. Taken together, the chapters describe a life filled with a sense of accompaniment by the Divine as well as by the community. It encourages an attentive life, often with a contemplative bent. It urges reflection rather than over-reaction. This, in turn, supports a measured pace that is equally deliberate, seasoned, and unrushed. If on occasion we pause to look back over the road we have traveled, we'll see moments of heartfelt meaning. We'll notice places where a difference was made. We'll recognize occasions when we have served and been served. Often in retrospect, we will see what looks to be the work of Spirit in the mix of it all.

My life did not unfold exactly as my twenty-year old self expected. Even after I responded to a call of the life-altering sort, my path evolved in unimagined ways. Life and ministry were not as I anticipated, but up to this point I can only say it has been better than I ever imagined it could be. I do not make this statement based on a particular place of

service, but on the joy experienced, relationships developed, moments of profound satisfaction, and best of all, the opportunity to make positive contributions to the journeys others are traveling.

For those standing at the intersection of one of life's big moments where the Spirit is wooing you, know that there are many resources at your disposal. Some are within you, while others are around you. For those facing one of life's big crossroad moments that seem to have nothing to do with ministry or spirituality, know that these same resources have tremendous value for sifting and sorting the various details weighing upon you. Employing some combination of them may enhance significantly the quality of life you experience. For those nowhere near a fork or junction in your journey and who simply want to keep on keeping on, the perspectives shared here are easily adaptable to less life-altering moments. These practices root and sustain us in a spirituality grounded in time-tested experience among Quakers. Call and discernment are keys to success, not only in matters of ministry, but in our efforts to flourish over the course of a lifetime.