

I AM A LEADER

WHEN WOMEN DISCOVER
THE JOY OF THEIR CALLING

ANGIE WARD

"Angie's words will give you the peace and confidence
to embrace your calling and step into the leader you are."

JENNI CATRON
AUTHOR AND SPEAKER

Dr. Angie Ward has written an incredibly thoughtful and practical book to help women understand the significance of calling. If the words *leader* and *calling* both exhilarate and paralyze you, Angie's words, stories, and insights will give you the peace and confidence to embrace your calling and step into the leader you are.

JENNI CATRON, author, speaker, and founder of The 4Sight Group

While reading *I Am a Leader*, I found myself wishing over and over again that it had been written forty years ago, when I was starting my ministry journey. Angie addresses very practical, heartfelt issues of women in leadership. It is honest, balanced, and comprehensive in subject and will be a tremendous resource to any woman sensing God's call to lead.

REV. TAMMY DUNAHOO, VP of US Operations and general supervisor at The Foursquare Church

A smart and well-written master class in understanding and discovering your God-given calling. Filled with biblical insight, real-life examples, and articulate explanations of the often-confusing tensions of calling, Angie Ward's *I Am a Leader* is a must-read for every female leader longing to be all God is calling her to be!

KADI COLE, leadership consultant and author of *Developing Female Leaders*

This book is just what every woman in ministry struggling with calling and leadership needs. It is both biblical and balanced, powerful and practical, autobiographical and authentic, incisive and insightful, clear and creative, and humorous and helpful. Come to think of it, it's just what every Christian man needs, as well, both for himself and for more insight into the women around him. Thanks, Angie, for this special gift to all of us.

CRAIG L. BLOMBERG, PH.D., distinguished professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary

It shouldn't be so, but it often is. Christian women struggle to figure out their calling to lead because of implicit and explicit biases to the contrary. Ward's book is inspirational and practical, helping women understand the double meanings often layered on words like *ministry*, *calling*, and *leadership*. Using biblical examples, lots of women's voices, conversational questions, and great content, Ward guides the reader through the discernment process for women helping women be the gifted leaders God has freed them to be.

MARYKATE MORSE, woman leader, church planter, professor, and writer

I am thankful for leaders like Angie Ward who demonstrate and teach what it means to be a woman who leads within a biblical framework. Rather than getting bogged down in leadership limits, *I Am a Leader* helps women discover their unique calling and develop their God-given leadership gifts within that calling.

GEOFF SURRATT, cofounder of MinistryTogether and coauthor of *Together*

Angie Ward deftly navigates the minefield that women in leadership can sometimes face—touching on topics that most men never even have to consider. She answers questions such as, *Is it even okay for me to be a leader? How do I know what my calling is, and can I even use that term? How does my calling impact my children and my marriage? And what about various seasons of life?* For any woman who feels called to be a leader—in any sense of the term—Angie Ward invites you to walk into your God-given influence with dignity, authority, and grace for yourself and for every woman who will come after you.

AUBREY SAMPSON, author of *The Louder Song*, church planter, preacher, and part of Lausanne's Think Tank for Women in Leadership

Women often feel both a strong call from God and a strong hesitation. *I Am a Leader* is a practical resource that helps them name and navigate the concerns and step forward with confidence into the call. It provides stories and quotes throughout from a diverse collection of women, providing friends for the journey.

MANDY SMITH, pastor of University Christian Church; author of *The Vulnerable Pastor*

How qualified am I to speak about the calling of women into ministry? Well, technically, not very. But as a man who likes to think he's been a very small voice in the cheering section for women in leadership roles, I am so grateful for this book! Angie encourages her readers to step into the mysterious, beautiful, and not-always-easy life of following God's voice. But she never leaves you on the path alone and wondering. Like the greatest of coaches, Angie speaks with just the right mix of encouragement and nudging to keep things moving forward. Thoroughly biblical and utterly readable, this is a book I'll give to my daughters. And to more than a few men I know.

GREG HOLDER, lead pastor of The Crossing; author of *The Genius of One*

As a young woman exploring a career in ministry, this is a must-read. Angie's words remind me that my leadership gifts matter, while equipping me to negotiate the challenging aspects of exercising that calling at home and at work. Her holistic approach is full of grace and grit as she explores the *why* without ignoring the *how*. I know I will return to this book again and again. It is a blueprint for the balancing act of womanhood, work, and worship.

SAMANTHA BEACH KILEY, writer and performer

Read *I Am a Leader* and share in the stories of women finding their sense of God's call. Learn from the wisdom and depth of Angie Ward how to pray, discern, and see the signs of God moving in all seasons of your life. Turn these pages and experience "the nudge" of God's calling.

DAVID FITCH, B. R. Lindner chair of Evangelical Theology at Northern Seminary in Chicago; author of *Faithful Presence*

The whisper, the nudge, the prompting, that holy something . . . the calling. Angie has written a powerful, equipping resource to interpret that holy invitation in tangible ways. Read this book and step into the deep gladness of your calling.

TRICIA LOTT WILLIFORD, author of *You Can Do This* and *Just. You. Wait.*

Angie Ward's book, *I Am a Leader*, is the last leadership book you need to buy—man or woman. Yes, this book is written specifically for women and is spot-on in addressing the critical issues women need to face when accepting and pursuing their call. But a lot of the principles and wisdom shared is valuable for men as well. The chapter on “Stages of a Woman’s Life” is masterful and really resonated with me as a developmental psychologist who counsels both women and men through the transitions in their lives. Ward doesn’t just show you the city on the hill as a woman leader—she gives directions. If you are a woman, this is a *must-read* for you to be unleashed as a leader. If you are a man, *this book is a must-read* to clear away the obstacles and champion the leader in the women the Lord has placed around you.

RODNEY L. COOPER, PH.D, Kenneth and Jean Hansen Professor of Discipleship and Leadership Development at Gordon–Conwell Theological Seminary—Charlotte

For men, Angie’s book should remind us that calling is not as simple as it should be for women. Yet it is simple. To use Angie’s words, “You are unique;—and yet—You are not alone.” My prayer is that Angie’s stories and truth-telling will give a voice and a direction for women who know deep down that they are called, yet whose calling has not been welcomed. I join Angie in her prayer that women will take courage and be encouraged by her book.

TREY FINLEY, M.DIV., executive director of eleven:28 Ministries

Ward’s writing is insightful, practical, and honest in ways that are not just enjoyable to read but also transformative. For all of us who desire that women would discover and live into their calling, this is simply one of the best resources around.

JR ROZKO, national director of Missio Alliance

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THE JOY OF THEIR CALLING

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INTRODUCTION

It might feel like a nudge.

Or maybe it's a burden you can't shake.

A burning. A whisper. A leading. A feeling of discontent. A prompting. An invitation. Perhaps even a command.

It's hard to describe, but you're sure of it: You've experienced *something*.

This *something* has come from Someone outside of yourself, yet at the same time, it resonates deep within your spirit. And it is asking, perhaps urgently, for a response.

But . . . you have so many questions, all cluttering your head and heart, clamoring for attention.

Did I hear correctly? Can I really do this? How will I make this work? What will this mean for my family? What if I fail? What if I succeed?

You take a deep breath.

There it is, again.

Will you join me?

I know the feeling.

+ + +

I was twenty years old, at home in Wisconsin on Christmas break from my Christian college. An English/

Communications major with the goal of a journalism career, I was fortunate to work as a freelancer for my hometown newspaper. On this particular night, I was working my usual four-o'clock-to-midnight shift at the sports desk, fielding calls from high-school basketball coaches who were reporting that day's scores and stats. It was routine work, and I was hunched over my computer terminal when a voice interrupted my random thoughts.

"I want you to work *with* people instead of writing *about* them," the voice said.

And that voice was not coming from any other human in the newsroom.

I sat up straight. While I loved journalism, part of me was also interested in some type of Christian ministry. In fact, I had already declared a minor in Youth Ministry at college. As a teenager, I had been deeply impacted by my church's youth ministry and by my youth pastor and his wife, and I was interested in making a similar difference for teens. Still, my plan was to work as a reporter, eventually working my way up to a big-city newspaper or bureau, while maybe volunteering in youth ministry at a local church.

But by that Christmas break of my junior year, I had become jaded and cynical. Part of this was the result of getting up close to a lot of ugliness in the world as a journalist, but my cynicism was no doubt also fed by a growing anger toward what I saw as rampant hypocrisy among the Christians I knew. My "Christian" parents had just finalized an acrimonious divorce; my "Christian" church had split, resulting in the loss of four pastors in six months (including my youth pastor); and I saw all sorts of decidedly

un-Christian activities among students and the administration at my “Christian” college.

I was seriously contemplating walking away from my faith—and then I heard that voice at the sports desk.

Mind you, I know that it is possible to work with people *and* write about them. But at that time in my life, I was using professional distance to protect myself from personal hurt. I thought that if I could keep a hard outer crust, I could avoid the potential pain of getting close to people. But when the voice spoke, I knew immediately what it meant for me.

I also knew immediately *who*—or rather, *Who*—was speaking. It was not the first time I had heard this voice. At the time, I was angry with God and hadn’t been talking to him much, but I still knew when he was speaking to me—and this was one of those times. This invitation was not my first, although it was the first time I experienced clear direction from him about my vocation.

I didn’t respond immediately to this voice, this *call*. First, I had to decide whether I was going to stick with the whole Christian thing in the first place. But over the course of the following year, this call to ministry became clear through a number of avenues of confirmation. My (eventual) response of humbled obedience began a nearly thirty-year ministry leadership journey that continues today.

THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU

If you are reading this book, you are part of a unique, more specific group of Christian women. You identify (or have been identified) as a *leader*, whether or not you currently

serve in a formal leadership position within an organization. You are also involved in *ministry*: some type of specific Christian service, whether within a local church, a Christian ministry, your home, or your community—or even as a leader who is a Christian in an organization or context that is not explicitly Christian.

And at some point in your life, you have experienced a *call*: that nudge/burden/burning *something* that asks, *Will you join me?* And right now, you're wrestling with that invitation, that *calling*—what it is, and how it plays out for you.

Of course, these are a lot of loaded terms—words that can have varied meanings and powerful emotional connotations depending on your frame of reference. *Calling* is a loaded term. So is *ministry*. And, particularly for Christian women, so is *leader*.

So, what *is* calling, and how does a woman leader live it out? We'll get to that in-depth in the rest of this book. In addition to figuring out what calling *is*, we need to understand how to discern calling. Are there different types of calling? How do you know you're hearing an invitation from God and not just the rumblings of last night's pizza? And what does calling look like as it is lived out in real life and leadership—a woman's everyday responsibilities, issues of power and authority, family relationships? What about in various seasons of a woman's life, from young adulthood to empty nest? What role does money play in following a call? Where is the line between stepping out in faith or foolishness?

And then, of course, we must consider the challenges and curveballs women experience in pursuing their call. There are moments, months, or more when following a perceived

calling involves great difficulty, disappointment, and pain. What do we do with doubt, discouragement, and dry seasons?

We'll get to all of that, I promise. But here at the beginning, it's helpful for us to first understand those other two loaded terms. What do we mean by *ministry*? And who qualifies as a *leader*?

What Counts as Ministry?

For many people, “the ministry” denotes full-time Christian service as either a pastor or a missionary. This understanding originated in medieval times, when a priest (the “sacred”) was set apart to represent a congregation (the “secular”) in prayers to God, preaching, and administering the sacraments.

The Reformation brought an emphasis on the priesthood of all believers—the idea that all Christians are equal in terms of access to God and ability to serve in his Kingdom mission.¹

In other words, “There are no such things as spiritual and secular jobs—we just made that up,” writes author and Bible teacher Jennie Allen. “God calls people to himself, and then to display him in every way, wherever we are. So are you called to teach or write or mother or build homes or fly planes? Beautiful. Do it as unto the Lord.”² Christians are to be the hands and feet of Christ, ministering the gospel wherever God has placed them. Therefore, we should *all* be “in ministry.”

Even if we do not subscribe to the sacred-secular divide, it is easy to rank certain types of Kingdom work as more important or spiritual. For example, we tend to rank full-time jobs over part-time jobs, paid positions over volunteer

roles, overseas work over opportunities in our own town, and managers over worker bees. But as ministry leader and author Tish Warren Harrison rightly points out, “There is no task too small or too routine to reflect God’s glory and worth.”³

Serving as a missionary in Africa is ministry. So is pastoring a church. But when done for Christ, ministry is also washing dishes, foster parenting, teaching middle school, working a factory assembly line, folding laundry, performing surgery, waiting tables, balancing corporate ledgers, and bringing orange slices to Little League. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters” (Colossians 3:23).

Who Is a Leader?

We tend to think of leaders as those with a specific position or title within a formal organization. But the essence of leadership is *influence in relationship*, regardless of a particular title or role in a particular context.

In my seminary classes, I define leadership as “influence on people to movement toward a vision.” By that definition, if you have any type of influence in any kind of relationship, you are a leader.

Let that sink in for a moment. *If you have influence, you are a leader.*

Again, we often think of influence in terms of someone “higher up” or “more important.” But your influence can be gained or given from a number of sources: positional authority or title; financial, emotional, physical, or spiritual power;

or personal relationship and trust based on your example and integrity.

Influence is not restricted to a certain age, appearance, ability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or personality type. It can be exercised up, down, and all around wherever God has placed you.

So, yes, you are a leader if you are a CEO, a pastor, a director, a manager. But you are also a leader if you are an employee, a volunteer, a mentor, a discipler, a teacher, a writer, a friend, a neighbor, a wife, a mother, a daughter. The question is not *whether* you have influence; the questions are: *Where* do you have influence, and *how* are you using that influence to bring honor and glory to God?

HOW WE'RE GOING TO GET THERE

As I write this, I can see my fiftieth birthday a few swipes ahead on my calendar. Of that almost half a century, I have been a follower of Christ for nearly forty years and in some type of Christian ministry for almost thirty. I've served in volunteer and paid positions in churches, camps, campus ministries, and Christian colleges and seminaries. In those roles and now as a writer, teacher, and consultant, I've worked with hundreds of ministry leaders. I'm even married to a pastor, for Pete's sake.

In other words, the majority of my adult life has been spent in the realm of Christian ministry, listening for and responding to God's call. I, too, have wrestled—repeatedly—with issues regarding calling in general and my calling in particular: as a woman, a leader, a wife, a mom, and a follower

of Christ. I have experienced confidence, clarity, confusion, discouragement, dry seasons, frustration, and fruitfulness. I'm certainly no expert; I'm just experienced to some degree, and I look forward to sharing more of my story as we walk together through the pages ahead.

You'll also find in this book the real-life experiences of women just like you and me. If I have any wisdom, it lies in the realization that there are many who are far wiser. In the following pages, you will meet dozens of amazing women of all ages, life stages, ethnicities, and geographic locations. I have been honored to hear and to hold their stories during the course of this project, and I am excited to introduce them to you in this book. Most of my conversations took place via video chat, with a few in-person meetings as geography allowed. In some of these stories, names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and organizations involved—but the stories and experiences are 100 percent true.

Friends, we're in this together. *We need each other.* This path of pursuing our calling is challenging enough without wondering and worrying whether our travel companions can be trusted. I want to make sure we're starting from the same place so that we know we can trust each other along the way. So, before we move forward, I'd like to lay out some assumptions and agreements.

First, the Bible is authoritative on all issues to which it speaks. It can be trusted because it is God's Word, and God is perfect and perfectly trustworthy. Not only does Scripture bear witness to itself and to the Messiah but there are plenty of other writings that establish the historicity of Jesus and the reliability of Scripture.

INTRODUCTION

Second, we as humans are not perfect, nor are we perfectly trustworthy. Therefore, we can agree to disagree. The lenses with which we view the various issues related to a woman's calling are colored by our personal experiences, by our theological traditions, and by our cultural contexts. Yet we all tend to think our perspectives are the normal, "right" ones.

You might not agree with everything in this book. Even the women I interviewed would not always agree with each other if they met in person. But please know that every woman in these pages (including me) is a godly sister in Jesus Christ who seeks to follow him with her whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. Let's be open to what God might want to teach us through different perspectives.

Third, this book may make you uncomfortable. In fact, I hope it does. As a teacher, my goal is to create an environment that is safe, yet one that fosters *disequilibrium*: the uncomfortable feeling of instability or imbalance that is necessary for growth. Not only will you read stories that may not square with your own experiences or assumptions but you may feel God rocking your boat, moving you toward some type of change in attitude, belief, or action. I encourage you to pay attention, even to lean in to any discomfort you may feel. You may finish this book with more questions than answers, and that's okay. My desire is to help *you* wrestle with God's direction in your life, not to tell you what to do.

DEEP GLADNESS

The esteemed writer and theologian Frederick Buechner famously said that calling is "the place where your deep

gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”⁴ Pursuing your calling can often be very challenging. But there is unshakable joy—deep gladness—to be found in the knowledge that you were made with a purpose and in the process of walking intimately with God to discover and live out that purpose as a woman leader.

My hope and prayer is that as you read this book, you will experience the power and deep gladness of these two truths:

1. You are unique;

—and yet—

2. You are not alone.

You are unique. There is no one else exactly like you. You have been “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14) as “God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for [you] to do” (Ephesians 2:10). As a leader, you are an even rarer breed of Christian woman. I hope this book helps you discover, clarify, and rejoice in your unique story, gifts, and calling.

At the same time, you are not alone. There are women who have walked the same path before you, and there are women around the world who walk beside you. I hope this book deepens your sense of the powerful, beautiful sisterhood we all share as Christ-following, female ministry leaders.

Let’s step into this together, shall we?

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

- » Why did you decide to read (or at least start!) this book?
- » What are you hoping to learn from this book?
- » Ask the Lord to open your mind and heart to what he might want to teach you as you progress through these pages.
- » Would you describe your journey of calling as one of “deep gladness”? If not, how would you describe it?

Chapter 1

WHAT IS CALLING?

I can't remember when I first heard the term *calling*. I just know that by the time I got to seminary at age twenty-four, I was using the word to describe why I was there and why I picked the particular seminary I attended.

Why did I come to this seminary? Simple. "God called me here," I replied, to knowing nods and murmurs.

By then, I had marinated in Christian subculture for long enough that I think the word had just seeped into my vocabulary. Growing up in church, I heard missionaries talk about how they were called to specific countries and people groups. I heard my pastors talk about how they had been called to (or away from) our church. In college, I probably heard chapel speakers talk about the importance of following God's call. I also talked with friends who had been dumped

by a boyfriend or girlfriend who felt God “telling” them to do it. (Of the validity of that last “calling,” I was often skeptical.)

As a Christian, *calling* definitely seemed like a super-spiritual word. A “call” from God implied a close relationship with him. Who wouldn’t want to hear from God directly? Plus, using the word *calling* raised the speaker and his or her behavior above dispute. How do you argue with someone who claims to act on the voice of the Lord?

As I continued through seminary and then into vocational ministry, I heard and used *calling* frequently. I heard it used in so many ways, however, that I wasn’t actually sure what it meant. And as I progressed through different stages of my own life, I continued to wrestle with calling: both what it was in general and what *mine* was.

So, what *is* calling, really? Can it be defined? Are there different types of calling? And how is God’s “calling” (whatever that is) related to his commands, our “purpose” or “vocation,” our passions and dreams, and our everyday responsibilities?

WHEN GOD CALLS

The theme of calling is woven throughout God’s Word, although it sometimes looks a bit different than we’d expect. The Hebrew word commonly translated *called* in English had two primary meanings: either to catch someone’s attention or to name a person or place.¹ For example, an aging Isaac *called* for his son Jacob to come receive his blessing (Genesis 28:1), while a few verses later, Jacob renamed the city of Luz, *calling* it Bethel (“house of God”) after seeing God in a dream near that city (Genesis 28:19).

WOMEN SPEAK: BIBLICAL CHARACTERS

Which biblical character and his or her calling has inspired you?

- “Priscilla, because her calling and function in the church are easy for me to identify with. She’s a married, working woman whose calling and function in the church were influential and necessary for its health.”
—*Amanda*
- “Jonah, because my first instinct is to sometimes run the other direction when God calls me to something challenging. How many days have I been in the belly of a whale, avoiding my own Nineveh?”
—*Allison*
- “Peter. He was such a mess-up, and I can so relate. I love that Jesus’ call on Peter’s life didn’t change after he fell and failed.”—*Nicole*
- “Job. I love how God let him ask hard questions.”—*Tricia*
- “Esther. I hate confrontation, but God repeatedly puts me in positions of power or leadership to be a mouthpiece for change.”—*Kelly*
- “Priscilla. I love that she was bold, intelligent, and strategic and that she operated as part of a team.”
—*Jana*
- “Deborah, because she made herself available to be used by God, and he did just that.”—*Jennifer*

Of course, these types of calling in Scripture were not limited to human-to-human interaction. Many times in the Old Testament, we see God communicating directly with human beings. In the book of 1 Samuel, God spoke to Samuel, a young minister-in-training under Eli the priest. One evening, Samuel seemed to hear an audible voice calling his name, so he ran to Eli's side, assuming the priest had summoned him. But Eli said no, he had not called for the boy, and Samuel should go back to bed.

After this happened three times, the wise old priest realized that Samuel was hearing the voice of the Lord. He instructed the boy, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening'" (1 Samuel 3:9). Samuel did as he was told, and thus began his lifetime of listening to the Lord as a prophet to the kingdom of Israel.

The Bible also shows us numerous examples of groups and individuals who were chosen by God—"called out," as it were—for a specific role or task. In the Old Testament, one way God commonly did this was by command. For example, to Abram (later Abraham), God's direction was firm and clear: "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1).

Although the biblical description of this interaction does not use the word *called*, both the Lord and the Jewish people later referred to it as an example of calling. Centuries later, God told the Israelites through Isaiah, "Look to Abraham, your father. . . . When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many" (Isaiah 51:2). And the writer of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews also noted Abraham's calling as part of the "Faith Hall of Fame":

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

HEBREWS 11:8

Other well-known Old Testament examples of God calling an individual via command include Noah, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jonah.

In the Old Testament, God established a covenant relationship with the chosen nation of Israel and called individuals out of that nation for specific work. Jesus demonstrated a very different approach in the New Testament. A call from Jesus began not with a command for a task but with a simple invitation: “Follow me.” As the Son of God, Jesus sought first to draw people to the Father through himself. This invitation was open to all individuals, regardless of nationality.

An invitation to give up everything to follow Jesus was also an invitation to join him in the work of the Kingdom. “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men,” Jesus said to Peter and Andrew (Matthew 4:19, NASB). As his followers continued to grow in knowledge and faith, Jesus sent them on his behalf to heal the sick, drive out demons, and proclaim the Kingdom of God (Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-17).

After Jesus’ ascension to heaven, his followers continued to preach and practice this understanding of calling, first as an invitation to follow Jesus (“come”) and then as an imperative to serve him (“go”). The early church also recognized that each person was given specific abilities, resources, and opportunities to be used in service to God. We see an example of this in

Acts 6, when the believers chose seven men to care for widows so that the apostles could focus on teaching the Word of God.

It makes sense that calling would be a recurring theme in the writings of Paul, as his story is perhaps the most famous New Testament example of calling. After a dramatic encounter with God, this man known as Saul, a notorious persecutor of Christians, became Paul, follower of Christ. In Acts 13, the Lord—through the Holy Spirit—instructed leaders at the church in Antioch to “set apart for me Barnabas and Saul [as he was still known] for the work to which I have called them” (verse 2). Paul ended up becoming the greatest missionary of the first century, spreading the gospel and starting over a dozen churches throughout the Roman empire. In his letters and his preaching, Paul repeatedly referenced his calling as an apostle and evangelist to the Gentiles (Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:1), noting that he was “sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Galatians 1:1).

In the lives of a host of men and women—Job, Joseph, Esther, the prophets, John the Baptist, Mary, Peter, Philip, Priscilla, Lydia, Timothy, to name only a few—the Lord chose, invited, or directed people for a specific purpose. Even when the word itself is not used or God does not speak directly, the *concept* of calling clearly permeates Scripture.

DEFINING CALLING

In Scripture, *calling* is a broad and encompassing concept, but in the centuries following the early church, the term began to take on a narrower meaning: that of ordained service specifically to the church. One contemporary ramification of this

historical shift is that the term *call* now has a specific definition and use in some church denominations. In these circles, a call is generally understood as an invitation to pastor a church. A “called position” requires a personal sense of “call” by the minister, a confirmation of that individual’s call by the denominational governing body, and an actual “call” (or invitation) by the congregation to a specific position within that church. As you can imagine, the variety of uses of the concept and term *calling* between various denominational and theological understandings makes for confusing conversations!

So, how can we define calling for the purposes of this book? One of my doctoral professors once said, “The person who controls the definition controls the discussion.” Since we’re going to spend the rest of this book discussing what calling looks like in real life, we should try to find a simple yet clear definition to make sure we’re starting from the same place. But calling is something known as a *construct*—an intangible, often hypothetical concept, like human intelligence, happiness, or initiative—that is difficult to define or quantify. Here are how some others have tried to capture calling:

The truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service.—Os Guinness²

Individuals’ calling to partnership with God in which particular gifts are evoked and developed in

concert with their discernment of the particular role God has given them to play during a certain period of their lives.—Richard Robert Osmer³

A conviction [that] steadily deepens.—L.T. Lyall⁴

A strong urge towards a particular way of life or career.—*Oxford Living Dictionaries*⁵

[Calling] at its deepest level is, “This is something I can’t not do.”—Parker J. Palmer⁶

Looking at the definitions above, we can’t miss the consistent theme of *conviction*—an inner persuasion, in this case toward a particular life direction, that cannot be ignored. If we follow Christ, both the conviction and the direction are given by God.

But conviction isn’t the whole sum of calling. I think that good ol’ Webster’s dictionary actually defines it best:

calling (*n.*): a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action especially when accompanied by conviction of divine influence.⁷

So let’s apply some algebraic simplification principles and move terms around to put all of these things together:

Calling is a God-given conviction about your life’s direction.

WOMEN SPEAK: DEFINING CALLING

How would you define calling?

- “I have always thought of calling as a sense of ‘I can do no other.’”—*Fran*
- “I would define *calling* as my specific assignment, my place to be in the body.”—*Chara*
- “Calling is the way God has asked each person to live out their faith in ways consistent with their giftings and place in life.”—*Tammi*
- “For me, calling is that deep-down voice of God that says, ‘This is what you were made for.’”—*Cherie*
- “Calling is when you realize God’s plan for your life. That’s when you can see how you’ve been groomed and gifted for following it.”—*Allison*
- “I would define *calling* as a drawing to a personal vision or a certain job, purpose, or mission.”—*Joyce*
- “Calling is the Holy Spirit’s interference with one’s regular way of life, followed by an invitation to do something different.”—*Denise*

As we will see throughout this book, a person’s calling can take many forms. But at its core, calling comes from God, it involves a deep inner assurance, and it has the potential to change the course of a person’s life. Calling is powerful stuff.

No wonder so many people spend so much time and energy trying to discern theirs.

THE NATURE OF CALLING

Calling is powerful. It is also complex, which is why it can be so hard to understand and discern. In my attempts to understand (and explain) calling, I have discovered that calling has a both/and characteristic as well as several either/or possibilities.

Both/And

As we have seen, the New Testament speaks of a dual sense of calling: first of a call to follow Christ, and then of a call to personally join his work in the world. Writers and theologians use various terms for this dual sense of calling, including “general and specific,” “primary and secondary,” “ordinary and special,” or “vertical and horizontal.” Writer Halee Gray Scott explains the distinction in this way: “We are first called into the family of God; then we are called out into the world to bring others into a relationship with God.”⁸

In this sense, as author and social critic Os Guinness points out, “No follower of Christ is without a calling.”⁹ *However, it is important to keep these callings in the correct order.* “The calling to follow Christ lies at the root of every other calling,” explains the Theology of Work Project.¹⁰ “Secondary callings matter, but only because the primary calling matters most.”¹¹ Guinness’s point cannot be overstated: *The most important calling is Jesus’ invitation to follow him.* If you have not accepted this invitation, no other calling matters.

This primary call to follow Christ also involves a funda-

mental shift in identity. By answering this call, we become legally adopted, fully vested sons and daughters of God (see Romans 8:14-17). The follower of Jesus is therefore “called” in two ways: first, by being invited to follow; and second, by receiving a new name and identity in Christ—which takes us back to the basic meaning of the biblical word for calling.

Thirteen years before I heard my secondary call at the sports desk in the newsroom, I heard God’s primary call on a Sunday morning at church. It was Palm Sunday 1979, just before my ninth birthday. I don’t remember many details of the sermon by our senior pastor, but I do know that something stirred deep in my young heart when he talked about going to heaven and living with Jesus forever. As was a regular practice at that church, at the end of his sermon, the pastor gave an “altar call,” an invitation to come to the front of the sanctuary to pray to trust Christ for salvation.

Although I was painfully shy as a child and the thought of going forward in church terrified me, I nevertheless felt like this was something I wanted—no, *needed*—to do. I nudged my mom and asked if she would go with me. She agreed, and I self-consciously slipped from the pew and into the aisle. A deacon met us at the railing bordering the steps at the front of the sanctuary, knelt with us, and asked if I knew what I was doing and its significance. I nodded, my stomach churning with nerves. He kindly offered to pray first, and I could repeat what he said. I don’t remember any of the words we prayed; my stomach continued revving, faster and faster, until the deacon and I said, “Amen.”

And then I threw up, right there on the altar at the front of the church.

It's true: Jesus cleansed me from the inside out.

In that very public, projectile moment at the front of our church, I not only professed belief, I *became* a new person, one now identified by my relationship to Christ.

Each of us who follows Jesus has received a primary calling to a new identity, but this calling is not just individual. I believe Guinness correctly expands the notion of general calling to include what he labels a “corporate” calling: “The corporate calling . . . is that part of our life-response to God that we undertake in common with all other followers of Christ,” he writes.¹²

In other words, there is a thick, oft-neglected middle layer of obedience between general and specific callings. In our Western individualism, we can easily jump from responding to Christ's initial invitation to trying to figure out our personal purpose. We worry about finding our specific call while ignoring so many general things God *has* already called us toward.¹³ As members of the church (the universal body of Christ), all Christians are called—actually, commanded—to Christlikeness in a variety of everyday actions and attitudes: caring for the poor, widows, and orphans; demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit; living in right relationships; and showing faithfulness in the myriad of “little things” that have been entrusted to our stewardship.

Julie, a recent seminary graduate at age forty-four, found it helpful to focus on her corporate calling and on *being* while she waited on direction for *doing*. “A few months ago, I had a conversation with the professor who has mentored me,” she shared. “As I was struggling with where to go from here, he encouraged me by saying he was not convinced that it was

so much ‘what I was going to do’ as ‘who I am everywhere I go’ that God was going to use. That’s not to say I won’t ‘do’ something but that I shouldn’t get fixated on it.”

As Guinness declares, “Anyone citing his or her individual calling as grounds for rejecting the church’s corporate calling is self-deluded.”¹⁴ We are wrong to expect God to reveal our specific calling if we do not first seek to obey this corporate calling.

It is crucial for us to understand our primary calling, both corporate and individual, before we can truly live into our secondary calling. But where the primary calling is clear and defined, the secondary calling can feel more elusive. Because of that, for the remainder of this book, when I talk about *calling* and the process of discovering and living out your calling, I will be talking about the specific or secondary calling to join God’s redemptive work in the world, not the primary or general calling to follow Christ.

Either/Or

As we respond to God’s primary calling, we should remain attentive and open to how God may choose to reveal our secondary calling. We may find that our calling emerges in ways that are different from what we expect or from how it has emerged for others. There are several either/or methods by which God might reveal a secondary calling: broad or detailed, patient or urgent, time-limited or long-term.

BROAD OR DETAILED

In the actual delivering of an individual call, God sometimes gives us details up front. Other times, the initial instruction is more general, and he gives us the details as we go. To Jonah,

God's initial direction was specific: Go to Nineveh (Jonah 1:2). For Abraham, it was more general: Leave your family and go to the land *I* will show you (Genesis 12:1). Paul's broader call was to proclaim the gospel as a missionary to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Romans 11:13), and as he followed that call, he received specific instructions regarding where to travel and how long to stay. We see examples of both broad and detailed callings in Scripture, so both are equally viable divine methods. God knows that sometimes we need the details and sometimes we need to learn trust while we wait for the details.

"At the moment, I think my calling is just to be at seminary," said Sharon, who is pursuing a master of divinity in Christian Formation. "I don't know exactly where it goes beyond that, and I think that's by God's design, because he knows I like to think I have control of my life. I think this is probably a period of obedience, just to follow step one and let steps two, three, and four kind of coalesce as they may."

Jes reported a similar experience. "Starting in the fall of 2016, I felt like God wanted me to quit my job," she said. "I thought, 'Well, I'll quit when I know what to do.' But God said, *No*. He called me to quit and just wait. The way he deals with me is to give me one tiny glimpse at a time."

This broad-or-detailed aspect of calling can also apply to roles and direction, not just to timetable. Some Christ followers are called to a specific country, people group, job, position, or organization; others are called to a general type of ministry, wherever or to whomever God leads.

During a focused period of discernment about twenty years ago, I sensed God clarifying that my broad calling was to "identify, develop, and encourage ministry leaders." God

has led me to exercise that calling in a variety of contexts and roles at different times in my life. I've served as a volunteer and a paid staff member; in churches, Christian colleges and seminaries, nonprofit ministries, and my own home; with youth and adults, women and men; in the United States and abroad; and through writing, teaching, speaking, leading, coaching, and consulting. Sometimes I've had a formal role, and many other times, I have done these things without an official position or title.

If God doesn't give you the details, it does not mean that your calling is less legitimate—or less worthy of obedience. “When God tells you to follow Him, He is not obligated to reveal your destination immediately,” writes pastor and author Henry Blackaby.¹⁵ Our job is to follow what we *have* been given, not to worry about what we have not yet heard.

PATIENT OR URGENT

For some, God's calling begins as a gentle nudge or a distant vision. Other times, his calling interrupts life like a fire alarm, jolting you to attention and immediate action. Joseph, the son of Jacob, dreamed as a young boy that his brothers would bow down to him. He was subsequently sold into slavery and languished in prison for years while God orchestrated the location, timing, and connections that one day would turn Joseph into the second-most-powerful man in Egypt, ready to lead the country and its neighbors—including his groveling brothers—through a devastating famine (Genesis 37, 42–45). Joseph, the father of Jesus, on the other hand, received orders—also in a dream—to take Mary and young Jesus and leave Bethlehem immediately for Egypt in order

to hide from King Herod, who was seeking to kill the boy (Matthew 2:13-15). Moses underwent a forty-year (!) season of preparation before encountering God in the burning bush (Exodus 7:7; Deuteronomy 34). Paul received a plea from a man of Macedonia via a vision and got ready to leave at once, believing it was the Lord's direction (Acts 16:9-10).

My friend LeeAnn was happily following what she felt was God's calling to serve and lead in a Bible study for medical wives in her city of Rochester, Minnesota, home of the world-famous Mayo Clinic. But there was another nudge that wouldn't go away—the nudge to adopt a child with special needs. “I always felt like, being in Rochester, we had this overwhelming sense of—not obligation, but like, here we are with great insurance, ten minutes from one of the major medical centers in the world,” LeeAnn said. “The more I found out about the need for adopting, the more my reasons [for not adopting] were cheapened.

“It became something that was simmering for a while. I could put the lid on the pot to stop it, but then it boiled over. Everything I was studying and reading just became overwhelming,” she continued. “I thought, *We have room in our house, and we have room in our hearts—how can we not?*” LeeAnn, her husband, Peter, and their two teenage daughters adopted a girl with spina bifida from China. A year later, they added a boy with similar medical issues.

“There was *huge* fear amid all the unknowns,” LeeAnn admitted. “But being on the ‘I can't do it’ side is just as stressful as taking that step of faith when the Spirit is pushing.”

The timetable God uses to reveal his calling should not affect our timetable—or our willingness—to obey that

calling. The Bible tells us, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (2 Peter 3:8). We need to trust his timing and be ready to respond as soon as the calling becomes clear.

TIME-LIMITED OR LONG-TERM

God’s calling can also vary in duration. Some may be called to a particular task for a very short time period, others to a life-time assignment. Shortly after Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, God gave a very specific calling to a disciple named Ananias: “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight” (Acts 9:11-12). Ananias’s obedience to this time-limited calling brought sight to Saul, who then took the gospel to the Gentiles.

The Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles usually received a long-term calling, with short-term assignments as part of that long-term call. The prophet Jeremiah received a word from the Lord that he had been set aside before birth as a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5). He then received dozens, perhaps hundreds, of short-term messages and instructions over the course of his prophetic life.

Sometimes a time-limited calling opens doors and desires for a longer-term opportunity or serves as preparation for the long-term calling, or vice versa. The Bible doesn’t tell us a lot about Esther’s everyday responsibilities as queen to King Xerxes, but we do know that she was in the right position at the right time when Haman developed a plot to kill her Jewish countrymen and women. Esther’s marriage to the king (her

long-term calling) allowed her to approach him in a time of crisis (a short-term calling) and ask him for an addendum to the murderous edict so that the Jews could defend themselves.

Of course, God can use these same type of “doorways” today. Andrea had grown up as a missionary kid, living in Ireland and the Philippines for seven years. Despite that (or perhaps because of it), she informed God, “I’ll do short-term trips, but I won’t do long-term trips.” (You can see where this is going, can’t you? Never say “never” to God . . .) A few years later, as a high-school junior, Andrea was back at her family’s home church in the United States, singing and worshipping at a youth-ministry event, when God first planted the seeds for her calling.

“I remember praying, ‘God, I want to follow your will for my life,’” she explained. “Then I felt God say, ‘I want you to go into missions.’ I freaked out. I was bawling. I was like, ‘No, absolutely not.’” A year later, however, she went with her youth group on a short-term mission trip to Nicaragua. “That is when God started to break down those walls and show me that maybe life as a full-time missionary isn’t the worst thing in the world, and how my passion for education, and math education specifically, could fit into ministry in Nicaragua,” she said. Andrea ended up going to Nicaragua for nine more short-term trips before moving there as a full-time missionary, teaching math at a Christian school. “This is home now,” she said.

An attorney in what she calls her “former life,” Carolyn began working at her church ten-to-fifteen hours per week, developing the small-group ministry in order to help fix a problem she had experienced: trying to connect at a church

of over three thousand attendees. “Fast-forward over time, and that little part-time gig turned out to be a calling and a career,” she said. “Every year, I ask God, ‘Really, we’re doing this another year?’” Carolyn is now pastor of small groups and a core member of her church’s pastoral team, which includes additional responsibilities and authority in the areas of hospital visitation, message planning, curriculum writing, and worship planning, among others.

“When I was in my twenties, I thought calling was this big ‘aha,’ like finding the person you marry or something,” said Carolyn, now fifty. “Calling is really just following Jesus into whatever he is asking you to do in that season of life.”

These stories show that God can call us in any way he wants, to anything he wants. He may call us to a purpose, a posture, a path, a group of people, or a specific position. Our responsibility is to develop listening ears and obedient hearts for whatever God wants to reveal, in whatever ways he chooses to reveal it.

SORTING THROUGH TERMS

As you read this, you may feel that *calling* sounds a lot like some other words and ideas you’ve heard related to your life direction, such as *purpose* or *responsibilities* or *passions*. How does *calling* connect to the other terms and concepts that are part of a Christian’s life?

Purpose

In 2002, Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in Southern California launched a worldwide phenomenon

with his bestselling book *The Purpose Driven Life*. “Even before the universe was created, God had you in mind, and he planned you for his purpose,” Warren writes.¹⁶ To date, *The Purpose Driven Life* has sold over thirty million copies, making it one of the top-ten bestselling Christian books of all time.¹⁷ The whole idea of personal purpose clearly touched a nerve with Christians and non-Christians alike.

So, how does *purpose* relate to *calling*? I believe they are very similar; in fact, Os Guinness uses the terms interchangeably. When most people talk about purpose, however, they are usually referring to the idea of *personal* or *specific* calling, not the general calling to Christ or even the corporate calling toward Christlikeness. *Purpose* can be a great substitute word for the idea of a specific calling, and in many contexts, it may be a better word to start a conversation instead of the churchy-sounding word *calling*. (I doubt *The Calling Driven Life* would have been a bestseller.) Just be clear about how you are using *purpose* in light of the various meanings and layers of *calling* that we have explored, and don’t ignore the spiritual importance of general and corporate callings over and above your personal calling.

Vocation

In contemporary conversation, the word *vocation* is often used synonymously with *occupation* or *career*. For example, the term *vocational ministry* usually refers to *occupational* ministry, such as a paid pastoral position in a church. *Vocation* is more correctly translated as “calling,” however: the former comes from the Latin root for *voice*, while the latter comes from the Anglo-Saxon root for the same concept.¹⁸ In his

book *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, Parker Palmer equates the two terms, noting that vocation is not a goal to be pursued, but a calling to hear¹⁹ and “a gift to be received.”²⁰

Needs

A wise children’s-ministry director at a former church once told me, “Not every need constitutes a call.” She meant that just because the nursery needed more workers did not mean that it was my responsibility to fill that need. As followers of Christ and as leaders, however, we should always keep our eyes open to the obvious needs around us and for ways we might meet those needs. “There is a time and a place to search for our unique parts in God’s story,” writes Jennie Allen, “*but . . . here is my admonition: Respond to the need you see. Right now.*”²¹

Also, never, *ever* develop the attitude that a particular task or need is beneath you. As part of your corporate calling as a servant of Christ, be willing to do whatever needs to be done.

Responsibilities

Responsibilities require our *response*. Sometimes we choose our responsibilities, and sometimes they are put on us. Either way, our responsibilities must be our first priority—our first calling, as it were.

If you are married, if you have children, if you are caring for an aging parent, if you are employed, if you have made some other type of commitment—take care of your responsibilities, for in doing so, you are fulfilling your calling. “The genuine call of duty and the voice of God do not conflict,”

writes J. Oswald Sanders. “It is our duty to do our duty. That simple fact takes care of a large area of life for which no further guidance need be sought.”²²

The Bible is clear that we are to be faithful in the little things (Luke 16:10)—and our various responsibilities often require a lot of little things. But it is in these little things that our faith and our faithfulness are forged. “The crucible of our formation is in the monotony of our daily routines,” Tish Harrison Warren wisely writes in her book, *Liturgy of the Ordinary*.²³ In other words, your responsibilities aren’t in the way of your calling; they are a big part *of* your calling.

Dreams and Passions

We will look more at the roles of dreams and passions in the next chapter, but I’ll admit that I get a bit nervous when I hear those words used in the context of calling. In our culture, we often hear how we should follow *our* dreams and passions. However, true calling is an invitation to respond *to God*. Dreams and passions are great—God can plant them in our minds and hearts as part of the calling process—but not all of our dreams or passions automatically equate to a God-given calling.

CALLING AND LEADERSHIP

What is the relationship between leadership and calling? While each of us has influence, not every woman is cognizant of or intentional about that influence. Among those who are, however, leadership is a critical part of their *identity*. They may also have a leadership role or title, but they view

WHAT IS CALLING?

themselves as leaders regardless of any particular position or rank on an organizational chart. It's just who they *are* because of how they see the world and their place in it.

Leadership, then, can be a calling to a role, but it can also be a calling to responsibility as a person of some type of influence. I am a leader—I view myself as a person of potential influence, and others automatically view me that way as well—even in situations where I don't have a formal leadership role and no one knows anything about me. For me, and for many other women leaders, *women* is an adjective that colors and informs my identity as a leader. I'm not a woman who happens to have a leadership role; *I am a leader* who happens to be a woman.

This is a critical distinction, and it explains why many woman leaders (including myself) don't always feel they "fit" within women's traditional ministry roles or expectations. Given the unique challenges that women leaders face, they (we) may sometimes feel they are a leader "trapped" in a woman's body, struggling to figure out how to faithfully live out this part of their identity. It might be helpful for you to reflect on the nature of your own leadership calling. And as we continue our journey together through this book, keep in mind that this leadership identity provides an overlay to any other role to which God may call you.

WHAT NOW?

So what does all of this mean for you and me as women ministry leaders?

First, *you have been called.*

This calling begins with an invitation to follow Christ. It then extends to the corporate calling of Christlikeness, then to your personal responsibilities, and finally, to a more specific God-given conviction—a “special” or “secondary” calling—regarding your life’s direction.

Take a few minutes to sit with this truth: *You have been called.*

The God of the universe speaks to us. He catches our attention. He asks us to follow him. He gives us a new identity. And to top it all off, he invites us to join his work in the world. That’s a whole lot of love at work, right there.

If you gain nothing else from this book, I hope you at least take away a deeper sense of God’s love for you. His calling is not about fear, force, or coercion; it’s about his bottomless love.

Second, *there is no one-size-fits-all calling* when it comes to a person’s “specific” call. God can call any person to any number of things, using any number of ways. Many of the women I talked to for this book prefaced their stories with, “For me . . .” to clarify that their experience was personal and not prescriptive.

Because each woman’s calling is unique, we should never let ourselves fall into the trap of comparing callings. No calling from God is better, more important, or more spiritual than another. God has created each one of us for a special role. Instead of comparing, we should focus instead on clarifying—seeking God’s direction about our own calling and helping other women discover theirs.

KINGDOM WOMEN ARE DIVERSE

We are kingdom women, and we are diverse. We have short hair and we have long hair; dirt is under our fingernails from toiling under the sun, and our fingernails are nicely manicured with pink nail polish; we stay at home with the children, care for our husbands, and support their careers, but we also choose to wear blue pantsuits and pastor churches. We wear yoga pants, leggings, mom jeans, cargo shorts, long skirts, and daisy dukes. . . .

We have gifts to teach, preach, prophesy, serve, lead, and build. We are church planters, we are kitchen ladies, we are number crunchers, we are directors, and we are worship leaders. We are nurturing, we are assertive, we are maternal, and we are fierce. . . . Many have tried to box us in or tell us who we *should be*, but when we look to Christ, we see cruciformity, love, grace, courage, and presence. Sure, try to box us in, but we are kingdom women, and we are diverse.²⁴

Tara Beth Leach

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

- » How has your denominational or theological background shaped your understanding of calling?
- » How did you experience God's general (or primary) call to follow him?
- » Are you obeying God in the "middle layer" between your general and your specific calls? In what areas do your attitudes and actions need to better reflect Christ?

I AM A LEADER

- » To whom are you most tempted to compare your calling? Why? Ask God to help you give up any internal need for comparison.
- » Name some biblical characters who learned only the broad direction of their call at the beginning, and others who received more details up front.
- » What are your current responsibilities? Are you tending to them faithfully?