

LOTT CAREY CALLING CONGREGATIONS

Noticing, Naming, and Nurturing
Young People with an Inclination
Toward Vocational Ministry



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What are Lott Carey Calling Congregations?

Lott Carey Calling Congregations develop practices that both welcome and encourage adolescents to consider the call to ministry as a viable vocational possibility for their lives. The call to vocational ministry is a noble call, and churches should be safe and inviting places for youth to “try on the mantle of ministry.” Further churches should seek intentionally to develop the capacity to discern when youth may have “an inclination toward ministry” and to nurture that inclination.

Lott Carey Calling Congregations resource each other to develop practices to help them “notice, name, and nurture” young people who may have an inclination toward vocational ministry and to create communities of youth from churches who can collaborate in ministry learning and leadership activities. We are not imposing practices, but exploring the development of practices appropriate to each congregation’s context. Additionally, participating youth are invited to exercise ministry leadership planning and implementation in their congregations and are invited to share leadership in Lott Carey’s International Youth Development Department. This gives them experience at congregational levels and beyond.



Instruction in youth is like engraving in stone.

—Libyan proverb



What might a Calling Congregation look like?

Pastors serving the churches in this project have imagined some helpful characteristics that Calling Congregations might have. While these characteristics are not exhaustive, we think they are helpful to consider.

Calling Congregations are seeking to strengthen their work in up to six of the following 12 characteristics. We believe our Calling Congregations should:

1. Have adults who can discern God’s call on the lives of youth.
2. Have pastoral leadership that invests

time and energy in mentoring prospective protégés.

3. Facilitate finding mentors for their charges when others can better nurture their gifts in particular areas or due to relocation on the part of the pastor or the protégé.
4. Make opportunities for youth to practice leadership in various aspects of ministry.
5. Enable intentional invitation to, and sometimes recruitment for, the exercising and developing of gifts.
6. Welcome competing

voices for vocations that call for the energy and engagement of young minds, hearts, and bodies.

7. Find creative ways to enable young people who may feel inclined toward ministry to “test the waters.”
8. Enable young people

9. Encourage people to seek fulfillment in vocational choices rather than prioritizing high income generating careers.
10. Affirm the mystery of call.
11. Affirm the dignity of

call—to the Christian life generally, and to vocational ministry particularly.

12. Invest resources in the cultivation of youth in service, learning, and leadership development.

Each congregation in our



cluster has evaluated their success in the above areas and has identified specific characteristics to strengthen. They used the following tool.

Assessment of Characteristics of a Calling Congregation



Rate how well your congregation demonstrates the following characteristics on a scale of 1 to 5.

- 1=Poor
- 2=Fair
- 3=So-So
- 4=Good
- 5=Very Good



CHARACTERISTIC	RATING
1. Have adults who can discern God's call on the lives of young people.	
2. Have Pastoral leadership that invests time and energy in mentoring prospective protégés.	
3. Facilitate finding mentors for their charges when others can better nurture their gifts in particular areas or due to relocation on the part of the pastor or the protégé.	
4. Make opportunities for youth to practice leadership in various aspects of ministry.	
5. Enable intentional invitation to, and sometimes recruitment for, the exercising and developing of gifts.	
6. Welcome competing voices for vocations that call for the energy and engagement of young "minds, hearts, and bodies."	
7. Find creative ways to enable young people who may feel inclined toward the ministry to "test the waters."	
8. Enable young people to explore vocational ministry options.	
9. Encourage people to seek fulfillment in vocational choices rather than prioritizing high-income careers.	
10. Affirm the mystery of call.	
11. Affirm the dignity of call—to the Christian life generally, and to vocational ministry specifically.	
12. Invest resources in the cultivation of youth in service, learning, and leadership development.	

Questions that Calling Congregations May Want to Ask

Churches that work to develop practices that welcome and encourage adolescents to consider the call to ministry as a viable vocational possibility for their lives may do well to consider the following questions:

1. How do we know when a young person has an inclination toward ministry? What does that inclination look like? Churches may need a word of caution about privileging a “celebrity” style inclination toward ministry. Viable vocational ministry is not always public, performance, or center-staged. Essential ministry gifts also include gifts of encouragement, administration, etc. Churches need to avoid recognizing only the best and brightest and the most outgoing and outstanding as people who may have an inclination toward ministry.



2. What roles can families of origins or households in which adolescents live play in “noticing, naming, and nurturing” young people inclined toward ministry?
3. How can churches affirm adolescents who may have an inclination toward vocational ministry when they do not live in families that can affirm this call—either because of the lack of capacity or of visions of different vocational options?
4. What kinds of leaders are best suited to advance the foci of Calling Congregations? What kinds of leaders



are most useful to facilitate “noticing, naming, and nurturing” in trying on the mantle of ministry?

5. How might Calling Congregations enrich their language when talking about “ministry”? The term has different connotations in different contexts. Sometimes “ministry” means preaching or

music. Some level the language by asserting, “every disciple is called to ministry.” If this is so, how do Calling Congregations define ministry as vocation?

6. What activities can churches use to give opportunities for adolescents to demonstrate authentic gifts that are observable to Calling Congregations rather than mere imitations of traditional roles modeled by adults?

7. How might we secure congregational ownership to become Calling Congregations as opposed to congregational permission for a youth department to do this work compartmentally?

8. How do we help adults adjust to, affirm, and welcome the creativity and originality of youth as we give more opportunities for leadership and participation (e.g., clothing styles, worship styles, youth oriented language, etc.)?

The Good Teen by Richard M. Lerner, Ph.D., encourages parents and other adults to view adolescents through the lens of positive development that sees teens as “assets in the making, rather than problems waiting to happen.” He challenges opinions that teenage years are inevitably tumultuous. He concludes from his research that teens can be nurtured to contribute positively to home, community, nation, and world.

Lerner builds his case on three decades as an applied developmental scientist where he has used the “strength based theory of human development” of Positive Development. He describes five (5) characteristics of teen behavior proven to advance positive development – Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring. He also gives insightful examples of how parents can foster the 5Cs.

The Good Teen convincingly argues that teens can “become” effectively functioning people who are good for the world. It explains how teens possess “plasticity.” They have the capacity to change, grow, learn, and mature. Lerner’s work grows from Tufts University’s Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development and the National 4-H Council funded 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development, both which he directs. His findings result in

Recommended



Book Review By
Dr. David Emmanuel Goatley

a readable and useful guide that can help parents raise teens to be good people. The real life examples model constructive behavior for parents that initiate positive development or that responds to challenges in ways that can yield positive outcomes. The book concludes with chapters that help parents to deal with teens that exhibit real troubled behavior, and it calls for communities to move toward developing policies and practices that nurture positive development for youth.

Lerner makes the case that we do have and can have good teens—people that make positive contributions to their world. Good teens can be developed when parents provide teens sustained positive interaction with adults, when they enable teens to participate in

activities that help them develop life skills, and when they give teens opportunities to become leaders of valued community activities. These he calls the Big 3. When this happens, parents can better achieve the goal “to raise teens who are healthy and self-reliant and who become productive adults who can assume leadership roles in their lives and in their community and the world at large.”

The Good Teen is instructive for more than parents. All who work with adolescents can benefit from the insight and encouragement Lerner provides. Growing numbers of teenagers enjoy decreasing time with families. School schedules, extra-curricular activities, parental workloads, technology entertainment, and the desire to socialize with peers precipitate the need for adolescents to have broad communities of adults who can contribute to their nurture in beneficial ways. *The Good Teen* has particular application for those who work with youth in churches. Rather than excessive attention to activities that can keep youth busy along with arbitrarily chosen Bible lessons thrown in for good measure, what might be the outcome of youth ministries organizing learning, sharing, and growing activities around the 5Cs? If congregations implemented programs to advance Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring in adolescents, they may discover that they can become places that help call out new generations of leaders for the church and the world.

A young man with short dark hair, wearing a light green polo shirt, is looking down at an open book he is holding. The book has a red cover and yellow pages. He is in a library, with bookshelves filled with books visible in the background. The lighting is soft and focused on him.

Lessons We're Learning

Thinking intentionally about practices that help churches notice, name, and nurture young people inclined toward vocational ministry is both challenging and exciting for Lott Carey Calling Congregations. Our pilot cluster, partially supported by a grant from The Fund for Theological Education, comprises five African American Baptist churches in Washington, D.C., and Northern Virginia. All are trying to explore habits and practices to improve our capacities in this area.

Challenging Work

The challenging aspect of this project relates to the newness of the concept for churches. Most churches with whom we are familiar respond to a young person who expresses that she may be, or that she has been, “called” to ministry. This call to ministry is usually interpreted to mean pursuing a preaching ministry in the life of the church. Precisely how churches respond differs, but they generally begin a journey toward preparing the “called one” for preaching an initial sermon. This journey can last a few weeks to several months. Essentially, however, churches wait for a young person to take the initiative.

Beyond beginning a journey toward preparing for a preaching ministry, the church tries to find an area for the new minister to exercise and develop leadership gifts. This practice of ministry arena might be among youth, in visitation, in teaching, and the like. What develops is something akin to an informal on-the-job training program or apprenticeship. Little attention, however, is given to formal assessments of spiritual gifts, skill sets, etc. The placement process generally is more intuitive or reliant upon the self-selection of the minister-in-training. Consequently, since most churches do not have formulated strategies or programs to implement, they have to build this work anew, which can be hard work.

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Exciting Work

The same thing that makes this project challenging, however, is also what makes it thrilling. Thinking creatively and imaginatively about how churches can better create space that is inviting and safe for young people to explore ministry, as possible vocation, is exciting. Being intentional about this project has invited pastors, adult leaders, and youth to engage together in ways that they have not normally done. Some of our pastors have grown in unexpected ways through the tutelage of their youth congregants. Sometimes that get laughed at, but mostly they are enjoying growing bonds of community, insight, and rapport.

Calling Congregation pastors who invest time and conversation with their youth are learning a lot. They are seeking to listen and ask questions so that they can learn more about the lives and insights of their youth. In this sense, the roles of mentoring are reversing. Youth are mentoring their pastors and enabling their pastors to view life from different perspectives and through different lenses. The pastors, although sometimes made uncomfortable, are learning and enjoying and

growing. The youth who are enjoying quality and quantity time with their pastors are taking seriously their role as mentors and teachers, and the relationships are maturing in ways that are important today and that will become more important in days to come.

Pushback

One unanticipated area of pushback comes from parents who are concerned that the church's intentionality is an effort to push their children into preaching or to a path that is leading to pastoral ministry. While the program is designed to help young people to begin a process of vocational discernment that may lead toward ministry as vocation, this is not a recruiting program. Still, some parents become uneasy about the idea of their children taking a path toward ministry vocation.

This uneasiness invites interesting questions. Why, for example, would parents not want their children to pursue ministry as vocation? One of the bizarre habits of some congregants is that we encourage our best and brightest young people to pursue careers in everything except vocational ministry. Be a lawyer. Be a doctor. Be an engineer. Be an entrepreneur. Be an actor. Be an athlete. Why do Christian parental dreams for their children's future usually ignore a life of fulltime vocational ministry? Why do Christians so often encourage our most promising young people to explore careers outside the church rather than inside the church? This habit risks "dumbing down" the pool of gifted future leaders for the church. Who else does that but the church?

Another pushback moment we experience is related to time. The time it takes to engage intentionally around conversations and activities that help young people have experiences that can lead them to begin to think about ministry as vocation competes with demanding schedules. Negotiating time in the calendars of adolescents is a formidable task. School, drama, dance, music, athletics, computer games, and "chillin" with friends does not give much time for young people to participate in activities imagined for this project.

Consequently, some parents interpret the Calling Congregations Project as being competitive rather than complimentary. This competition is further seen when commuting is part of the equation. Few churches are “neighborhood churches” in the sense that the majority of their congregants live within a three to five mile radius. Many urban congregants now live in suburbia. Juggling work and school and activities and travel create major tensions for time together. We are not convinced that technology can displace physical time together, but we are convinced that personal and technological interactions can be complimentary. Negotiating balance is an ongoing practice.

Discernment requires conversation and relationship building, and both of these take time to do. Leaders in this project seek to explain to parents that our vision of discipleship is holistic. We do not believe that some of life should be sacred and other parts should be secular. We understand discipleship to be an organizing principle for all of life. This area of resistance gives opportunity for us to emphasize the place of discernment in seeking to explore life vocation for young people and adults. Here we can emphasize the equal importance of journey and destination.

Emerging Theological Ideas

Faithful living is an organizing principle for life. Living faithfully as a disciple of Jesus requires holistic integration in the multiple communities, activities, relationships, and time commitments in the lives of youth (and adults).

Faith development is a journey of discernment. Journeys require time and commitment. Journeys bring celebration and frustration. Encouraging and facilitating discernment should be a priority ministry of the church.

Journey is equally as important as destination. Discovering what God may be calling one to as well as what God is not calling one to are equally important aspects of the journey, which gives the destination meaning.

Identifying young people who may pursue the ministry is a spiritual discipline for a church, just as worship and service and study of scripture are. For those who are not called, the journey will enable a growing maturity in their lives as believers.