

Calls to Worship

1

Lord we gather to worship you this day.
Open our ears to hear you speaking.
Guide us as we seek to follow your call on our lives.
By the power of your Spirit help us to recognise you at the centre of all we are.
Give us courage, strength and integrity to be your faithful disciples.
Amen

2

Lord we gather now to worship you.
In the stillness, the singing, the reading of scripture and our prayers.
May we recognise your love amongst us – new every morning, changing,
transforming and calling us.

Through the power of your Spirit may our hearts rejoice at your presence
and wonder at your love,
which binds us together as one people.
We gather now in the name of Jesus.
Amen

3

Loving God, in the sacredness of this time and space we meet to worship you.
Your love compels us to come in.
You call us gently, urgently, strongly.
You call us quietly, slowly sometimes unrecognisably.
In your calling may we hear your voice.
In our journeying may your Spirit encourage our faithfulness.
Amen

All age address

We know that there are rules of the road — cars have to drive on a certain side to avoid crashing into each other.

There are also rules when you travel by boat!

One rule used to be “sail over steam”, where a little sailing boat had priority over a bigger boat that went by steam power.

So a big steam ship should give way to a little yacht, but try telling that to a huge ocean liner that takes 10 miles to stop!

It's good to travel on the big powerful ships sometimes — you get less sea sick because when you're on a big ship you don't feel the waves so much.

The Queen Mary 2 is huge, a magnificent ship, as big as a village! She has all the latest technology on board, up to date navigation systems, and if you accidentally ran into her, you'd lose.

So you'd think that she can do everything, and more, than the little boats can do. But there are some things she can't do.

She can't navigate in shallower waters. Her keel (underside) is too big, so her engines can't be used to direct her.

That means that when this huge ship wants to move in certain places, she has to rely on little tug boats, which are about a hundredth of her size, to pull her and get her through the channels. So, even though the big ship looks mighty and powerful, sometimes it's the smaller boats that are actually of more use.

It's the same with people. Some people seem to be really strong and clever, and to know lots of things. But Jesus said that when it comes to understanding what God wants us to do for him, the people who seem to be the big, pushy ones, are not always the ones that see things best. Jesus said to God, “Father, you have hidden these things from the people who are wise and clever. But you have shown them to those who are like little children.”

So we shouldn't presume that it's only to the people we think of as clever that God reveals himself. He may prefer to show himself and what he needs more to those who are not what we may think of as the obvious choice.

So if you think God has a message for you, don't think, “I'm just a little tug boat, I don't know enough. He can't be speaking to me.” Listen to him and act on what he is telling you, because he is speaking to you.

Like the little boats, some people may seem weak and not much good, but they may well know the way through much better than the big posh ship!

Thinking about vocation

In thinking about vocation there are at least three strands. The first has to do with the call that can come to any person “Come and follow me”. This is the primary calling of any Christian — the initial call to become a disciple. The second strand is the call to a holy life, to Christlikeness which will mean different things to different people. It will be different for a man as opposed to a woman, different for someone prone to mental illness than for one who is not, different for all of us at different stages of our lives. The third strand of vocation is the call to specific roles in our lives that are often concerned with specific contexts or need or personal circumstances.

Moreover, we usually think of vocation in personal terms and we can point to all sorts of individuals in our Scriptures who responded to God’s call to do something, to take risks, to change direction and to make a difference. But there is also a more communal call to God’s people to be a particular type of community. Bishop John Austin Baker once said that an agenda item on every church meeting or PCC ought to be “What is God calling us to be and do in this community to help it become more like the family that God longs it to be?”

Although these resources are primarily focused on helping individuals hear and respond to God’s call to them, there is also a sense in which we hope they might be used to help churches address the question of what God is calling them to be and do at the moment.

Probably the most critical point in Jewish history was the Exile in Babylon. This was a period of deep searching for the soul of a community that felt bereft, estranged from God, confused in their own theological understanding of what was happening to them, and in many cases despairing and desperate (Psalm 137 — How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?).

Yet this became the most creative period in Jewish history as prophets like Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55) were active in helping people reassess not only what was happening to them but also their understanding of God. Many scholars today believe Western Christianity has entered a period of exile. Christendom is dying, if not dead. All our old presuppositions about the position and role of the church in society are being challenged by science and secular materialism and sometimes the world can feel like alien territory to a Christian and to those for whom church is still important.

So we are suggesting texts from that exilic period as the basis for our Vocations Sunday material this year. These might provide challenge and /or comfort to both individuals and churches to listen again to God’s call on their lives, both personal and communal.

continued overleaf..

...Thinking about vocation continued

In periods of exile, alienation and apparent hopelessness, people need a word of hope, even if it is only a glimmer. When God spoke to Ezekiel and showed him a vision of dry bones, Ezekiel was faced with a question, “Can these dry bones live?” (Ezekiel 37:3) He couldn’t answer it.

Hope had not yet been kindled in his heart. But there was a glimmer — “You know” was his reply to God. He had enough trust in God to do what God asked of him. “Prophesy, and hear the word of the Lord.”

Hope is engendered by vision and the true prophet paints such a picture of the kingdom of God that it inspires men and women to work towards it and in such working, to bring the vision that much closer to realisation.

As we think of vocation and the need in our churches for individual men and women to lead our churches and hear God’s call to such spiritual leadership, we also need to reflect on the call to each church community to be the kind of community in which Christlikeness is found. Can these dry bones live?

This material is written in the belief that God’s Spirit can equip, empower and renew God’s people to respond to his call, to make a difference, for Christ’s sake, in the church and in the world.

Sermon sound bites

These suggestions are not meant to provide the basis for a sermon/address but might just set the worship leader/preacher off in a direction that can be developed.

The prophets of the exile have the task of both challenging the people of Israel in Babylon and also offering them hope — a task needed today in so many of our churches. What Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah did, in their different ways was to offer visions of hope towards which people could aspire and work towards, thus moving them in the direction of the vision outlined.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in ‘Nations and Empires’

“It is man’s ineluctable (inescapable) fate to work on tasks which he cannot complete in his brief span of years, to accept responsibilities the true ends of which he cannot fulfil, and to build communities which cannot realise the perfection of his visions”

On the same theme **Jonathan Sacks** wrote in ‘The dignity of Difference’

“Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the faith that together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue. Hope is an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to have hope.”

Jean Vanier, founder of “L’Arche” in his book ‘Community and growth’ said

“We shouldn’t seek the ideal community. It is a question of loving those whom God has set beside us today. They are signs of God. We might have chosen different people, people who were more cheerful and intelligent. But they are the ones God has given us, the ones he has chosen for us. It is with them that we are called to create unity and live in covenant.”

There are a number of examples in the Bible of God’s reluctant agents, Jeremiah felt he was too young, Isaiah too sinful, Moses too tongue-tied, Jacob too conniving and many others. Here are words from **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** from his ‘Letters from prison’

“I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil, even out of the greatest evil. For that purpose he needs people who make the best use of everything. I believe that God will give us all the strength we need to resist in all times of distress. But he never gives it in advance, lest we rely on ourselves and not on him alone.”

God’s call often comes through a “still small voice.”

Timothy Ratcliffe in ‘What’s the point of being a Christian’ writes,

“It is through attentiveness to meaning and not brute force that we share in God speaking a word that brings in the kingdom... Jesus taught that small signs were part of God speaking a word that creates and recreates.”

Stages on the way

(A reflection on training for ministry)

You can run but you can't hide. This has been the hallmark of my journey into ministry. I began my training at Northern College in Manchester in September 2010, following a thirty year career in social work.

Beginning my training was a relief, for as I look back over the years, I recall the many occasions I argued with God, believing I knew best, that I was in control and on the right path, feeling a sense of vocation in my "social work ministry," and not wanting to be diverted from this.

God had other ideas, I chose to argue. The persistence of God calling me, took me on a long journey, changing my job when the call became more urgent, busying myself with what I thought was important, but God pressed on with his quest. In the end I found doors closing in the social work world that forced me to listen to the God I was trying to ignore.

Sometimes God takes us on longer journeys to help us discover and prepare for the ministry he calls us to in his name.

Through prayer and reflection, training and college life is taking me into a deeper and more personal relationship with the God I seek to serve. My training is structured to encourage a sense of reflection through placement opportunities and academic study, and through developing relationships with fellow students, placement supervisors and college tutors.

God has taken me firmly by the hand and is leading me where he wants me to go. I have surrendered my life to his will and rather than resisting I am letting God "call the tune." I feel a sense of peace and fulfilment, mixed with some self-doubt and nervousness at the enormity of what God is calling me to.

The challenge is exhilarating, demanding and humbling. I am running the marathon race for God; I am relying on his strength and his direction. I am no longer seeking to do things in my own strength, but according to the will of God.

As for my arguing with God... I have no regrets, the journey and the wrestling with my sense of call have all been a significant part of my journey. I would not be the person I am at this point in my life without the experiences and the people I have encountered in my life. God is patient and faithful to me, walking a longer journey that has equipped me for the task of ministry to which I feel honoured and humbled to be called.

Prayers of Intercession 1

You may like to have a response after each paragraph along the lines of:

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We thank you for the possibilities of life,
help us to embrace the adventure of life you call us to,
as creation breaks forth we pray that we may respond to your presence,
your beckoning call and serve you

We pray for places experiencing drought, flooding and disaster,
the results of which bring sickness, suffering, disease and death.
We pray for all for whom another day is a struggle.

For those living in darkness, longing to hear words of love,
for those in slavery, held captive longing to be set free.
for those suffering abuse, desperate for liberation.
May they all look to you to uphold them, even to lift them up,
may they know the rest you give to the weary.

We thank you for your love and compassion to all,
we pray for those who are grieving today,
especially we remember...

We pray that people may hear God's comforting voice
and know his presence closer than the air they breathe.

May we make you and your ways known and build your kingdom in our
daily lives. Keep us always open to your voice, calling us to serve you

We thank you for the challenges and encouragement you give us to identify
our gifts and the gifts of others that we might better serve you.

Help us to choose to do those things to which you call us.
Encourage those who feel they have no gifts, no value,
reveal to them your love, mercy and compassion
and may they sense your call on their lives as they respond to you

We pray for the church across the world,
where it is complacent stir it up,
where it is weak and under attack, strengthen it,
where it is lost and needing direction, gently encourage and inspire it,
where it is faithfully witnessing to you, continue to fan into flame its gifts
and may it find its hope renewed.

...Prayers of Intercession continued

Help us to discern you in our midst, at work in our world.
Call and challenge us to work with you,
to be part of your good news to this world.
Make us alive to the needs of our community.

Help us as we seek to demonstrate love and compassion in action.

We praise you for your great kindness
and ask that we would mirror that kindness in loving acts for our neighbours.

For those who are rejoicing today we give thanks,
we rejoice in the many good things in the world,
for the signs of hope and light shining in dark places,
for the glimpses of your presence we see,
for the acts of kindness that abound,
for Christians making a difference to lives and communities across the world.

Prayers of intercession 2

Gracious God, who calls us all to work with you for the sake of your kingdom, open our ears to the sound of your voice through the needs of your world, your church, and the communities in which you have placed us.

Help us to listen to the gentle calling of your Spirit as we open our lives to your call upon us. In the midst of the many voices which clamour for our attention help us to look for and listen for the leading of your Holy Spirit.

Lord hear us.

Lord graciously hear us.

We pray for all those entering on a new stage in their lives, a change in career, a new job, parenting, a rethinking of life, moving home, retirement life as a single....

Give them your help and the security of your presence to know that when you call you also equip. May the challenges of new opportunities bring with them the joy of doing your will.

Lord hear us.

Lord graciously hear us.

We pray for all Christians called by you to serve you in the world of business and commerce. May the integrity that faith in Christ brings shine forth in all their work. Enable them to work for human flourishing more than financial gain and give them wisdom in some of the hard decisions they will face.

Lord hear us.

Lord graciously hear us.

We pray for all those blessed with practical skills of building, fixing, repairing, problem solving; those who work with modern technology whose contribution to everyday living is immeasurable. Help them to use their creativity for the well being of the communities they serve.

Lord hear us.

Lord graciously hear us.

For Christians called by you to use their gifts in healing, teaching, listening, counselling and encouraging others: NHS workers, social workers, counsellors, volunteers, lecturers and teachers, hospice workers that in dealing with people they may reflect the dignity that you see in all people.

...Prayers of Intercession continued

Lord hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

For women and men who have to make hard decisions in politics, in the armed forces, in the emergency services, sometimes decisions of life and death and the appropriate use of scarce resources. For those called to tend and care for the earth and its produce who are co-creators with you, bless them with wisdom discernment and humility.

Lord hear us.

Lord graciously hear us.

We pray, too, for those entrusted with leading the Christian church: for denominational leaders, for ministers, Church Related Community Workers, elders, local leaders and all those called to proclaim the gospel and lead our Christian communities. Deepen their faith, so that rooted and grounded in Christ and incarnating his love, they might encourage, teach and inspire your people to be his body in the world.

Lord hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

For those whose vocation in this life is ending, grant them your peace and the assurance of your presence, friends who will grieve but also rejoice in lives well-lived in your service,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Resources

Suggested hymns

Sent by the Lord am I (250 CH4)

Take O take me as I am (795 CH4)

Take this moment, sign and space (501 CH4)

Ye servants of God (293 R & S)

I, the Lord of sea and sky (362 Methodist Hymns Old and New)

Take my life and let it be (371 R & S)

Holy Spirit ever living (615 CH4)

Christ who ascended to heaven above (679 CH4)

You are called to tell the story (680 CH4)

Send out the gospel! Let it sound (681 CH4)

All praise for wisdom, great gift sublime (177 CH4)

Moved by the gospel, let us move (247 CH4)

We have a gospel to proclaim (363 CH4)

Go in grace and make disciples (682 CH4)

Thuma mina (800 CH4) (129, Common Ground)

Lord of life we come to you (782 CH4)

O God you search me and you know me (97 CH4)

You are before me God, you are behind (96 CH4)

Jesus calls us œ'r the tumult (355 R & S)

R & S - Rejoice and Sing
CH4 - Church Hymnary 4

...Resources continued

Dramatic sketches

'The Call' by John Bell and Graham Maule in '*Hey Jesus, Yes Peter*'
Wild Goose publications.

'We did not want to go' from '*He was in the world*' by John L Bell
Wild Goose publications.

'God's own people' from '*He was in the world*' by John L Bell
Wild Goose publications.

Hymn

Jesus, Lord of love, you claim us

- 1 Jesus, Lord of love, you claim us
as your friends who, day by day,
live to demonstrate God's goodness
in the things we do and say.
As we follow your commandment,
bound by love that sets us free
lead us on faith's great adventure,
fill us with expectancy.
- 2 When we worship with your people,
still responding to your word,
as we offer prayers and praises,
your repeated call is heard.
Through the local church you guide us,
fellow members help us see
ways in which to take upon us
faith's responsibility.
- 3 Time and time again you claim us,
sometimes take us by surprise,
when you call on us to shoulder
some unlooked for enterprise.
So, at home in church or workplace
help us serve you faithfully,
sharing sacrifice and triumph,
filled with love's integrity.
- 4 We are glad that you have called us
your own friends with work to do,
chosen to fulfil your purpose,
our love proving your love true.
As we celebrate your guidance
through our past and future days,
fill us with love's joy, creating
sheer delight and endless praise.

Alan Gaunt (born 1935) The tunes ODE TO JOY is commended for this text

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Address given at a Vocations Fair

You might have heard the story of the wealthy man who enjoyed showing off his wealth and power to his friends and colleagues. He had a huge house, large grounds and a superb indoor swimming pool in which he kept his pet alligator.

One day, showing his friends his home he arrived at the pool with 3 friends and joking with them he said if anyone dared dive in the pool and swim to the other end he'd give his home to them or half his fortune, or even the hand of his beautiful daughter in marriage — and the group chuckled to each other and then “SPLASH” — in one of the guys dived and frantically started towards the other side of the pool. He just made it as the jaws of the alligator snapped shut, just catching his trouser leg as he got out of the water. All the group applauded him, even the owner of the house saying no one had dared to do what he did.

So what do you want? The house? No — I've got a nice home of my own. Half my fortune? No I'm OK as I am.

So it must be my beautiful daughter? No I'm engaged to be married to the most wonderful woman.

“Well what do you want then?”

I want to get my hands on the guy that pushed me in!

It's a silly story really but it's got a couple of simple truths about discovering vocation that may pertain to our lives as we think about them:

- Sometimes it takes a push from others to get us started.
- It's only when we're in the water we discover what we're capable of.

So I wonder why you're here this morning; perhaps a nagging, gnawing, inner conviction has pushed you to try and discover what you should be doing with your life; or perhaps you've been given a push by someone and you're being stretched.

I want to start by asking a question to all of us here.

Who are you? **What's your primary identity?**

I might describe myself as a white, male Anglo-Saxon, middle class father of two, husband of one, grandfather from Lancashire who was a teacher, now a minister and synod moderator in the United Reformed Church, and you will have got a picture, a **snapshot** of my life. It's a snapshot based on colour, gender, ethnicity, class role, geography, profession, vocation and family identity. If I had time I would ask you to do the same exercise and it might reveal quite a bit about you.

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...Address continued

But I haven't told you what I consider to be my primary identity.

I believe as profoundly as I am able that I am a **"CHILD OF GOD."**

Now I choose to say that, rather than I'm a child of the universe, and that is a statement of faith because I have come to believe, to know the God who is like Jesus.

So in my better moments I believe, and say that this is my primary identity. In my "worse" moments other identities can predominate!

But I am a child of God now, in the first decade of the 21st century in what has been described by one politician as **"Broken Britain"** a country with highest rate of single parent families in the western world; Where children in some communities are described as "feral" and uncontrollable; Where addictions to drugs, alcohol, sex and shopping mark out our culture; And society, in the words of one theologian, Marcus Borg, is dominated by the 3 "A's" — achievement, appearance and affluence.

This is our culture, our society and we're all caught up in it — even those who profess a faith in a Jesus, who is radically counter cultural.

Well all that's a preamble to saying a few words about our Bible reading this morning — the passage which is known as the call of Samuel.

1. We can't say that Israel was a broken nation at the time of Samuel. It wasn't even a nation, just a collection of tribes linked in a loose kind of federation and bound together by the story of deliverance from oppression in Egypt. But it seems like a pretty chaotic social milieu in to which Samuel was born. One of the holy sites, Shiloh did have a priest, Eli. He seemed like a decent sort of priest but his sons were shameless, corrupt and corrupting. The tribes were surrounded by enemies who sought to destroy them and we're told the "word of the Lord was rare" and there was no frequent vision".

It seemed like a **pretty broken place**, at least religiously, morally and politically.

And at this time God calls a young boy, and the writer says in a delightful phrase:

"The lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out."

These words reminded me of something our current General Secretary said, soon after her appointment **"I don't think God has finished with the URC yet."**

I don't know if any of you here ever get "down." I don't mean depressed in a clinical sort of way but have feelings of despair at the way things are going in the church and in our society. Whenever I'm inclined to feel like that I'm reminded of another OT story of **Elijah** when he goes

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into a cave and wants to die and says “There is only me left. I’ve done all I can.” And the writer of 1 Kings tells us that God says “OK, you’ve had your moan. There’s a job for you to do. I’ve got some people for you to anoint as kings and prophets, and by the way, there are another 7,000 people who are loyal to me.

As a synod moderator, I’ve seen enough life, faith and hope in ordinary URC Christians to say “The lamp of the Lord hasn’t gone out yet.”

He may also be saying “There are other people I am calling even now.”

2. Who was Samuel? Well he was Hannah and Elkanah’s son, conceived after a time of barrenness, long before in vitro fertilisation. Yes he came through Hannah and Elkanah, but not from them.

Just as the eastern mystic Kahlil Gibran wrote in the last century, **“Our children come through us, not from us.”**

Ultimately, and primarily, we are children of God, and once we become aware of that primary identity, showing the family likeness, understanding who and whose we are, begins to shape our thinking and affects our choices, and discernment of the future that our Creator might want for us..

But it is not straightforward. Few of us hear audible voices like those we read of in the Old and sometimes New Testaments. I wish God had spoken to me as clearly as he had spoken to Samuel. I might have skipped 9 years of teaching and gone straight into ministry.

But perhaps not. Just as it took time for Samuel’s call to be discerned, so it often takes time for us to hear.

And note, he didn’t hear, or rather he didn’t interpret what was going on in his life very well. I don’t doubt that some of you are here because you’ve “heard” something, that inner nagging, or conviction, but you’re not clear what it is about.

Well notice Samuel, the one who was to be a great a prophet needed the help of an **old man** to help him. And so might we! And I suppose that today you might find the odd old man, or woman hanging around here to listen to your story. Or maybe you’ve already found that someone who has said to you “it may be the Lord who is calling.”

For me it was a man called Sid, who allied with my feeling I could do better than my minister (I was a bit arrogant), was instrumental in me discovering my vocation.

3. We can’t prescribe God’s call. We often don’t fully know to what we are being called. There isn’t any one pattern:

- * the inner conviction that won’t go away;
- * the push into a situation which we would never have chosen but in which we find we are swimming well;

...Address continued

- * a need we see that we begin to feel passionate about;
 - * a sense that we are not fulfilling our potential as a child of God;
- ... And so much more.

And of course, we might be **wrong**. Lots of people feel called to be and do things for which they are unsuitable.

Jeremiah said “The heart is deceitful above all things”. We can easily deceive ourselves, and NOT deliberately. That is why the ordination service has the question:

“Are zeal for the glory of God, love for the Lord Jesus Christ, and a desire for salvation of all people, **AS FAR AS YOU KNOW YOUR OWN HEART**, the chief motives which lead you to enter this ministry?”

I spoke to my predecessor recently and told him I was coming to this Vocations Conference. He said he’d heard that there were a decent number of enquirers which was encouraging, but then he said, “There always are in a recession.”

“As far as you know your own heart.”

But I don’t want to finish on a negative note. Finding your vocation is one of the best things in life. In the long run it’s probably as good as sex! And it is a wonderful privilege, and a humbling one, when we are able to respond to whatever God might be saying to us with the words of Samuel. “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

I guess I should finish there. But the text demands one more comment. Samuel’s task wasn’t easy.

His first task was to tell Eli the truth about his priesthood and the way his family had betrayed God’s call. I don’t think Christian ministry, in all its forms, is easy. It wasn’t for Jesus, so why should it be for us?

The Methodist Covenant service puts it like this:

Christ has many services to be done.

Some are easy, others are difficult;

Some bring honour, others bring reproach.

Some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests,

Others are contrary to both;

In some we may please Christ and please ourselves.

In other we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.

Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.

I think that is one of the things that Methodists have got right.

I hope, if you’ve had the push into the water, either internally or externally, you’ll discover your potential and God’s potential in you, in whatever vocation you are called to fulfil.

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