

An Excerpt from...

When there's no Burning Bush

This article is adapted from WHEN THERE'S NO BURNING BUSH: Following Your Passions to Discover God's Call by Gary Morsch and Eddy Hall (Baker Books, 2004). Permission is granted to make copies of this article for use within your local church. For all other uses, contact the author eddyhall@living-stones.com for permission.

Why Knowing Spiritual Gifts Isn't Enough

by Eddy Hall

"Most of our members have been through our training to discover their spiritual gifts," the pastor told me. "They come out of the training with a lot of excitement. But it hasn't seemed to make any difference. People don't know what to do with their new awareness of their gifts. Have you run into this problem in other churches?"

Indeed I had. In fact, most of the churches I have worked with as a church consultant struggle with this problem. Why? In many cases, it is because of a common misconception—the *mistaken belief that your spiritual gifts tell you what your ministry should be.*

When I meet with leadership teams in churches, I sometimes say, "When I take a spiritual gift survey, I score high on teaching. Where would I fit in your church?" Someone always says, "Sunday school teacher." We have this idea that there is a one-to-one correspondence between certain gifts and certain positions in the church.

I go on to say, "You know, I have taught Sunday school before, and I may in the future, but right now I'm not teaching Sunday school. Does that mean I'm missing God's call?" I go on to list some of the ways I use my teaching gift—home schooling my children, writing, consulting with churches, leading workshops and retreats, speaking at church conferences—and everybody is then willing to let me off the hook for not teaching Sunday school. Simply knowing that you have the gift of teaching doesn't tell you whether you should be teaching Sunday school or using your gift in any of a dozen other possible ways. Knowing your spiritual gift isn't enough.

Let's come at this from the other direction. Imagine that your church is starting a Habitat for Humanity ministry team. How many of the seven spiritual gifts Paul

lists in Romans 12:6-8 would be valuable to that team? Would you need givers? Encouragers? A leader or two? Would you need servers—people who love to meet practical needs by working with their hands? Could you use people with the gift of compassion to relate to the family that will be moving into the home? How about a teacher—someone who can teach the congregation what the Bible has to say about ministry among the poor? Or someone with the gift of prophecy—someone gifted in boldly declaring God's truth—who might go to various churches in your community and share God's vision for this ministry?

Clearly all seven of these gifts, sometimes called the motivational gifts, would be valuable to the Habitat team. So would knowing which of these gifts God has given you tell you whether God wanted you on that team? Not at all. The team needs all seven, but so do a lot of other ministries. To know whether God wants you to serve on this ministry team or another one, you would have to go beyond discovering your spiritual gifts to discerning your call.

What does it mean to be called?

Our spiritual gifts and our calls to ministry are related, but different. 1 Corinthians 12:4-5 says, "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord." Just as there are different spiritual gifts, there are different kinds of service or ministries in which we can use those gifts.

One way the Bible uses the word *call* is to describe God's call to salvation that comes to everyone. We also talk about how all of us are called to be ministers. But here we are focusing on yet a third meaning of call, on God's call to a particular ministry or kind of service. God calls some people to pastoral ministry, evangelism, or missionary work. But God's call doesn't come only to those in professional ministry; it comes to all of us.

How can you know what kind of ministry God is calling you to do for this period of your life? Two questions are often useful in helping identify your God-given call or passion.

The first question: *What is it that breaks the heart of God that also breaks your heart?* Where in your world is the pain you most long to heal? Is it the pain of homelessness? Of latchkey children? Of racism? Are you burdened about teens who are growing up without a strong commitment to God? Or by the woundedness of adults you know who were abused as children? Is your heart broken by the unhealthy marriages you see?

Once you have named what causes you pain, ask yourself the second question: *What kind of personal ministry would you love to do, along with others, to touch this pain with God's love?* What is the better world you dream of in relation to this problem? Is it a world in which the homeless of your city all have decent shelter and food? If so, what part would you love to play, along with a group of others, to help make this dream a reality? Do you dream of a world where the racial groups in your town work together to achieve common goals? If so, what would you love to do, along with others, to bring this about? Would you love for those in your town with troubled marriages to be able to find support, acceptance, and practical help in healing their relationships? If that is your dream, what personal role in fulfilling that dream would bring you great joy?

Frederick Buechner writes, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Where Spiritual Gifts Come In

If your passion is what points you to the ministry to which God wants you to give yourself, where do spiritual gifts come in? Your gifts, along with other abilities, determine your role in that ministry. Take the Habitat for Humanity ministry team, for example. If you are to be a core member of this ministry team, you will know it because you will have a passion for responding to the needs of people who need better housing. But that passion doesn't tell you whether your primary role on the Habitat team is to pound nails or go around to churches to recruit volunteers, does it? That is determined by the abilities you bring to the ministry—your spiritual gifts, talents, skills, training, personality, and experience.

Your passion tells you which ministry team to join; your gifts and other abilities tell you what position to play on that team.

Beyond Slot-Filling

Robert Slocum tells how he was invited to speak at a church on the topic of "How to Get the Laity Involved in the Ministry of Your Church." A few hours later the pastor called him and said there had been a mistake. What he really wanted Robert to speak on was "How to Get the Church Involved in the Ministry of the Laity." There is a world of difference between those two topics, isn't there?

Churches with the first perspective think of ministry primarily in terms of church-run programs. Mobilizing people into ministry consists of recruiting people to staff those programs. I have a technical theological term I use to describe this approach: I call it *slot-filling*.

Slot-filling takes the program as the starting point, then looks for people to staff the program. Offering classes on spiritual gifts or using surveys to do a better job of matching people to the right slots is good so far as it goes. These churches end up with fewer square pegs in round holes. But so long as the starting point is the programs, and people are recruited to fill program slots, there will always be slots that no one is truly called to fill, and people will say yes because "somebody has to do it and it might as well be me."

When Christians fill slots as a substitute for finding and fulfilling God's call, nobody wins. The person doing the ministry, instead of finding joy in the work, finds it to be an energy-draining chore. The people being ministered to receive uninspired ministry at best. At the same time, the ministry that God has actually called people to do goes undone. It a double loss. The worker misses out on the joy and fulfillment that comes through fulfilling God's call and the people who would have been ministered to are left untouched.

When ministry is a chore, it drains the joy out of doing church. Ministry leaders dread recruiting. And because it takes 80% to 90% of the available warm bodies to fill all the slots, most of which serve those already in the church, few people have time and energy to reach out to minister to those outside the church—even if that is where their hearts are.

A better way

Fortunately, there is a better way. We can quit asking, "How can we get the laity involved in the ministry of the church?" and start asking, "How can we get the church involved in the ministry of the laity?" Instead of making programs the starting point for matching people to ministries, we can start by helping every Christian discern God's call. Then the church can ask, "How can we help you fulfill that call?" As people discover calls that don't match existing slots, we won't try to force them into slots. Instead, we will either reshape the holes to fit the pegs or empower people to create brand new ministry structures around what God is calling them to do.

The goal is not to keep all the programs running. The goal is to empower every member of the body to discover and fulfill his or her call. To make this possible, structures will have to be in constant flux—new ministries being born, old ministries being laid to rest, existing ministries being streamlined or reinvented. Programs can no longer be held sacred. Rather, what will be held sacred is the church's responsibility to equip and empower every member of the body to discover and carry out God's call.

For too long we have defined successful ministry in terms of starting more programs and increasing participation in the programs we already have. That is as good a definition as any of *program-driven ministry*. It is not possible to have a program-driven church without resorting to slot-filling.

The better way is to begin with people's calls and ask, "How can we help you fulfill your call?" This is the way of *call-driven ministry*.

* * * * *

If you would love to see your church make the transition from program-driven to call-driven ministry, we suggest that you take at least 40 percent of the adults in your congregation through the "When There's No Burning Bush" process. The book is designed as a discovery tool to be used in small group settings in the congregation. It features a thorough, step-by-step study/action guide in the back of the book.

Eddy Hall is senior consultant with Living Stones Associates (www.living-stones.com), a consulting team that helps congregations strengthen health and increase ministry effectiveness through strategic planning and training and coaching of congregational leaders.

1.

Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 95.

2.

Robert E. Slocum, *Maximize Your Ministry* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1990), pp. 169-170.