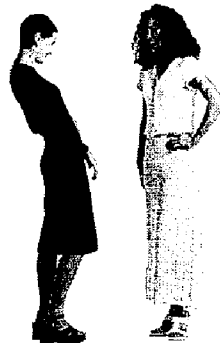


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Welcome from the Authors



THE WORLD CAN BE PRETTY CONFUSING AT times. By the time we reach adolescence, we have received literally thousands of messages about who we are supposed to be and what we should do with our lives. Different voices pull us in all sorts of directions and present us with countless choices. How do we find clear direction toward the paths that are right for us? This book is designed to help you answer this question for yourself. It was written especially for people ages sixteen to twenty, because that's when you make decisions that affect how you will spend your adult life.

When Christians talk about the path that God would have each of us take in life, they use the word *call*. *Call* is one of those churchy words that rarely gets defined—as if everyone should know what it means—but seems to mean a whole lot of different things. Sometimes call is spoken of in serious tones as if it's a lofty honor reserved for a few: "He received *the call*." Sometimes it seems like a terrible burden: "I am so tired of kids, but I'm stuck because teaching is *my calling!*" And far too often people use the word *call* carelessly, suggesting things such as it's part of their calling to have a fancy car.

The truth is that religious people have been struggling for centuries to understand exactly what call is, so if you're confused about yours, you are in good company. Call is hard to define. Of the many, many voices we hear in our lives, some can help us discover our call, but no single human voice can answer the question, "What is the call for my life?" So rather than provide

a formula for pinpointing your call, this book explores call, identifying its key characteristics. It also offers guidance for figuring out what call looks like in your own life.

The issue of call is essential for anyone who chooses to live as a follower of Jesus. We have spent our lives seeking to understand and practice our own callings and helping others do the same. Although we still have a lot to learn, we want to share with you what we have learned so far. We hope we can help you avoid some mistakes and some unnecessary detours in the years ahead, but even more, we hope we can encourage you to dream big, to trust yourself, and to trust that God is with you on your life journey.

In the following pages, in addition to learning key points about Christian calling, you will find stories from the Bible, stories of other young people, and stories from our lives. Our hope is that you will find connections between these stories and your own story. The goal is for you to explore God's calling for you, so each chapter ends with a reflection section and journal space to help you listen for the voice of God and to the voice of your true self. We would like you to commit yourself to participating in the reflection activities. They are designed to make this whole "call thing" real for you.

We want to be sure, though, that you respond in ways that are true to you. You may want to get an additional journal or a sketchbook so you can sometimes draw instead of write. If you are one of those people who likes to "process" things mentally, you may want to set aside enough time to take a walk. Or you may want to invite a friend to be a calling companion so you can discuss the reflection exercises. Finally, make sure you have a favorite Bible on hand in case you want to further explore the biblical stories of call.

Before you get started, though, why don't we take a moment for introductions:

MY NAME IS KAY. I retired four years ago after twenty-five years of working as a family therapist, helping families go through tough times, such as divorce, the death of a loved one, or substance abuse. That's quite unlike what I set out to do four decades ago. I expected to become a missionary to Africa, so after graduating from high school, I went off to college to study religion. Growing up in First Methodist Church, Greenville, Mississippi, I had heard exciting tales of missionaries and had also learned that overseas mission work was one of the few ministry choices open to women, so I opted to go into missions.

During college my path took a turn. I married a man who was planning to be a minister and switched majors to elementary education so I could support us through the seminary years. The change worked out great because I loved teaching young children. Over the years, I completed master's and doctoral degrees and worked as a college professor. My path turned toward family therapy through a course I took as part of my doctoral program. It dealt with the development of women in American society, and through it I began to see that women did not have to be limited to roles of the past. I began to ask myself two questions: "What excites me most?" and "What needs to be done in the world?" My answers brought me to the field of family therapy, where I could help people make their families places where all members are encouraged to be what God has gifted them to be—in relationships, in work, and in church. The dream of inviting others to be their true selves is one of the reasons I worked with Larry McSwain on this book.

I'M LARRY. Considering my background, I am amazed by the opportunities I have had to serve God. Until I finished eighth grade, I lived in Pond Creek, Oklahoma, a small com-

munity where my father was a Chevrolet dealer. Since his business was across the street from my school, I worked there some afternoons doing odd jobs. I also worked on a farm my father bought. One of my favorite memories is of my dad letting me drive our pickup for the first time.

After I finished the eighth grade, we moved to a small cattle ranch about a hundred miles away, so I had to adjust to living in a new community, attending a smaller school, and going to church in a town twelve miles from home. Most of my summers were spent working on the ranch, which meant long days with time to wonder about my life. By the time I was a sophomore in high school, I was actively talking to God about what I should do. I had become a Christian at the age of nine, and my childhood pastor had encouraged me to go into the pastoral ministry. I was interested in a lot of things, though, and I thought about staying on the farm, becoming an architect, or going into dentistry. Soon I found myself impatiently praying to God, "Lord, I would like to do with my life what you want, but I need to know more about what that is."

I had attended a youth assembly called Falls Creek a couple of times and appreciated their Bible studies, recreation, and spiritually charged worship services, so during the summer of my junior year, I prayed that I would find an answer during my week at Falls Creek. During that time, the sense that God was calling me to a full-time Christian vocation unfolded, and by the end of the week, I knew that God wanted me to give my life to sharing the gospel as a minister who works full-time in the church. I publicly declared that intention, and when I returned home, I shared the news with my family and church. I have spent more than forty years trying to live out the call I felt that night as an ordained minister and teacher of pastors.

Now that we've told a bit of our stories, why don't you take a few minutes to think about your own story.

For Reflection

1. How would you respond if you had to briefly answer the question, "Who are you?"
2. What experiences stand out in your life?
3. Are you able to talk about your life with God?
4. What dreams do you have for the future?
5. How has God influenced those dreams?

