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Thank you for leading this small group series! Vocation, or calling, are central facets of the life of the Church and, in our Reformed tradition we're clear that call is heard in the context of our various Councils. Local churches nurture and encourage leadership and stimulate discipleship. Our Elders' and Church Meetings discern calls to Eldership, Accredited Lay Preaching, Pioneer Ministry as well as Church Related Community Work and the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments – in their many forms. These reflections, most of which were first disseminated through the URC's Daily Devotions, help us think about a number of aspects of Call – I reflect on the fact that our Baptism is the basis of all our callings, Leo Roberts, the Children and Young People's Officer for the North Western

Synod reminds us of God's universal call to serve in the world, Ruth Whitehead reminds us to ask who benefits from any particular sense of Call. Some are called to the specific task of leadership and John Proctor reflects on what this might mean whilst Gordon Woods reflects on the ministry of Eldership. I consider the way in which we discern in the URC – never a personal thing alone, always a discernment task done together. Susan Durber examines the fact that we are all called in multiple ways and John Ellis helps us consider the call to let go and move on. Finally I reflect on the different ways in which the URC offers a variety of recognised ministries. We hope that these studies will help you focus on your calling; maybe you are exploring a call to join the Church, to become an Elder, or to candidate for ordained or commissioned ministry. Maybe you already serve the Church in some way and wonder how that role may develop or if it's time to let go of that role. Whatever your situation we hope and pray that you will listen and discern more fully your own vocation.

The material has been designed to deliver over 3 sessions – these might be mid-week group over four weeks or it might form the focus of an away day for a church group. It could be delivered in person or on line. These notes are to assist you prepare to lead a group.

Andy Braunston
Minister for Digital Worship, June 2023

What You Will Need....

The Notes are in booklet form and large print. You might want to print them for people or to email them for them to either print themselves or read on a device during the sessions.

Music Each session starts with a hymn. The tunes should be well known and able to be downloaded online. Please email via Andy.Braunston@urc.org.uk if you'd like some help finding music to sing along to. People like to sing and it's a good way to start each session.

To Keep Your Wits About You! The task of the leader is to facilitate the learning so know who you can ask to read a Biblical passage, the information box or the reflection box. It's good to have other voices but remember not everyone is comfortable reading in a small group.

Be prepared to gently encourage the quiet and quieten the more bubbly ones. "Thank you, has anyone else got a perspective on this, how about you Mabel?" is a good way to move a discussion on. Be aware of people are being too talkative and who isn't speaking enough.

Glance through the notes on each set of questions, below, in case folk get stuck! Your role isn't to answer (these are questions for discussion not to pass a quiz!) but to get conversation going.

Refreshments Someone, not necessarily you (!) should sort out refreshments and the setting and clearing up. I suggest people grab a coffee and biscuit as they come in and then get started. That might be easier than breaking and gathering everyone back again!

The Discussion Questions

In black I reproduce the discussion questions. Then in red some ideas to get them going if they get stuck!

Session 1 O Jesus I Have Promised

Called Through Baptism

What do you think of Andy's ideas about baptism being dangerous and subversive?

They are likely to talk about those countries where conversion to Christianity is illegal, after a while push them a little to think about how subversive baptism might be here. If we say "Jesus is Lord" who or what are we saying isn't?

Andy suggests that through Baptism we are given gifts used to build up the Church and serve the world. What gifts do you see at work in your congregation which helps with these tasks?

They may think of a number of gifts other people have to help with the church, try and move them a little to gifts which help those outside the church and, if you feel brave, ask them what gifts they have.

What might taking our church membership more seriously mean for us?

This might mean many things – turning up at Church Meeting, praying for new folk to come, inviting people to come along, mucking in with what needs doing, saying "we don't do this here" if someone gossips or attacks those in leadership.

In the World As We All Are

Leo suggests Jesus trusted the people He sent out to evangelise and, by implication trusts us! Why do you think we often find it difficult to talk about our faith?

- For many people faith is intensely personal and we often think personal means private.
- We may be afraid of offending another or that we won't have the right words; yet people aren't looking for a fight but for authenticity.
- We may not be sure what we believe and don't want to let the side down – yet folk like honesty – just as Jesus does.

What could you do to share your faith?

- People might find it helpful to invite friends along to a service “it's good, I'm going, would you like to come?”
- People might find it helpful to start to articulate what the difference is that faith makes to their lives (ask them) and then from that find things to say

How could the church help you?

- I'd like to hear these ideas!

Call and Servanthood

Ruth's colleague's wry question “to whose benefit is this ministry?” is interesting and is why in the URC we test calls to formal ministry through the various Councils of the Church. Why do you think people confuse a call to serve with something which makes them feel important?

We're broken people and sometimes our brokenness gets in the way even of our faith and any sense of call. We all need to feel loved and valued and, sometimes, the affirmation that may come from a sense of call can be quite addictive. This isn't helped by churches in decline sometimes being over enthusiastic about those who offer themselves for ministry.

How might local churches discern better about the motivations and aptitudes that people show who offer themselves for ministries?

It's helpful to consider how people are in little things and background tasks as much as they may be eager to do things upfront. Are they as happy to wash up or clean the loos as they are to lead worship? If not then the ministry to which they think they might be called might not be what they think it is!

Session 2 The Voice of God is Calling

Called to Leadership

Who, in your congregation is able to explain things like an "off the cuff theologian"? Who in your congregation is good at helping those who are struggling? Who in your congregation enjoys the confidence of your church?

This should be a fairly easy conversation though I'd be worried if they can't think of anyone!

How does your congregation encourage others to minister in these ways?

What we're really asking is how does your church train people to be leaders....Stepwise, the URC's discipleship development programme might be a good resource to explore.

Called to Elders

In what ways is Eldership a ministry rather than being, for example, a Committee member or buildings specialist?

- First one doesn't apply! It's a process of Call worked differently in each congregation but a Call comes from the Church Meeting and those who respond are ordained and inducted into their office.
- Second, the Eldership leads the local church alongside a minister, if there is one, and has responsibility for ensuring the provision of worship, attending to the church's mission at home and overseas, discerning call amongst those who offer themselves for ordered or commissioned ministry and a concern for the spiritual life of the congregation.
- Whilst we often get bogged down, as it were, with boilers, loos and finance, these are all very much secondary to the ministry of Eldership though are often the things we concentrate on as we see that as easier.

How do the criteria for leadership outlined in I Timothy sound to you? Are they realistic for contemporary leadership?

- They are: above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent, gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. Manages own household well, keeps children respectful and submissive, not a recent convert, well thought of by outsiders, serious, truthful, holding fast to the faith.
- Some of these may not accord well with our contemporary notions of equality but many of them seem wise. Are churches good at expecting these standards and being honest when they aren't met? (why/why not?)

Vocation is Tested and Discerned

Andy implies that vocation isn't about an inner feeling as much as an exterior recognition of Call by the Church. What do you think of that?

Contemporary society places a lot of emphasis on feelings; contemporary Christianity does too. There's a place for this – we want to feel better about the world, God and ourselves after worship than we did before, for example, but vocation isn't so much about the inner feeling but the external validation of the Church. Those who feel but aren't recognised can be hurt and can be dangerous. It's always for the Church to recognise who God is calling to work amongst us.

Our discernment processes are slow – is that frustrating or joyful for us? (why?)

It can be frustrating but we hope that we make better decisions with reflection and discernment. Decision making in the URC isn't so much an exercise in democracy as it is about discerning God's will. That can take time.

Session 3 How Clear Is Our Vocation Lord

Being Called by Many Voices

Susan discerns that we all have multiple vocations/callings. What are yours?

- To assist you might want to list yours – mine are: husband, uncle, friend, minister, sometime activist and wannabe historian.

- We all have multiple demands on our time and many of these demands are things we're called to; someone might be an Elder, a local preacher in addition to being a wife, grandmother and carer for example.
- Get people to be creative in thinking about what they are called to.

Some Christianities suggest that in following Jesus all will be well yet Susan suggests that Jesus implies a restlessness that comes from following him – has (and is) your Christian journey been safe and secure or rather more restless?

- Some have moved home or career in order to follow Jesus. Some have made decisions not to progress a career in order to serve in different ways. I can think of a couple in a church I know in Greater Manchester where a couple have adopted a child, now a man, with severe learning and behavioural difficulties which has limited their freedom but rewarded them hugely. That's also a vocation.

How do we balance the competing demands on our time from our various vocations?

- This is quite open ended but do try and encourage people to rest as well as everything else they do! Rest is quite counter cultural these days.

Vocation often means letting things go

Moving on always leaves loose ends – ministers never finish everything before they move or retire, lay leaders may move in the midst of exciting busy times – how does it feel when a much loved minister or lay leader moves on?

- I imagine a sense of worry about how things will work, gladness for the minister in finding a new and fulfilling role instead of becoming dry and disillusioned, these days a fear that the church might not get another minister any time soon or much less of a minister than it had before. Similar feelings with lay leaders. Perhaps these feelings emphasise the need to train people for leadership roles and model this in all that we do?

For ministers Calls have push and pull factors; St Jude's wonderful programmes for children and young people, its sea side setting, the evident care that it has for a minister can all be pull factors, push factors can be positive – a feeling that one's work is done, or negative – sniping criticism, unwillingness to try new things, incessant unpleasantness can also all be push factors. How might your congregation maximise its pull and minimise its push factors?

- A hard set of questions which means the participants need to know their congregations well. Dealing well with push factors might be the single biggest thing we can do to help our churches grow!

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us

Who might you describe the mission and purpose of your congregation?

- Most church folk find this very hard but it's a key question. If we don't know what we're for we find it hard to know what ministry we need or can offer to our communities.

What types of ministry does your church already have and what does it need (and why does it need it?)

- Of course if a church hasn't got a minister that will be the focus but what other forms of ministry might be useful? Community work?

Youth work? Older adults worker? Someone to look at how a fresh expression of Church might be useful in your community? A volunteer minister?

Who in your church might you perceive as having a call to some form of ministry – either local or wider?

Of course such discussion might mean people identify ministry gifts in each other!