

Feeling less than alive

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I was sitting in a seminary classroom, trying to twist my left-handed self into one of those awkward right-handed desks. I was taking part in an internship program, and the professor was waxing eloquently about calling. It was all good. She quoted [Frederick Buechner](#) and [Howard Thurman](#), and described vocation as our deep gladness and what makes us come alive.

But then, I wanted to protest. I had interviewed three people for the internship position, and all three of them stated outright that they didn't feel *called* to work with children. I know they didn't want to be pigeon-holed into a Christian Education job. But still. It was a church with a lot of kids and we needed to focus on them. The interviews made me terribly uncomfortable.

Children are an integral part of the church and if a person is not willing to work with children, then they have no business being a pastor. I cannot imagine going into a call committee and saying, "I really don't feel *called* to work with anyone between the ages of 55 and 65." I would be (rightfully) thrown out of the interview on my ear. Why would we think it would be different for working with kids? A child is not some sub-human thing walking around that we ignore. We work with children. We all work with children. Sadly, there are plenty of churches that they can go to where they will never have to work with a child, but hopefully the pastor going to that church will even be *more* called to work with kids—so that children will be attracted to the congregation.

I wondered if this strange idea that we could opt out of working with a segment of our church came from a really skewed sense of call. Yes, a vocation should give us joy, but sometimes the sunshine comes with sorrow and suffering. If we enter into the profession thinking that everyone is going to love us, that every day will make us come alive, that we only get the parts of the job we choose, we're going about it all wrong.

Sometimes we just have to do the job. And there might be things that we don't like about it—stressing over money, monitoring constant complaints, managing difficult employees, dealing with plumbing—whatever it might be. Being a pastor is a position that evokes so many skills, there are bound to be parts of it that we don't like as much as others. Plus, we go through tumultuous seasons. They often pass, just as surely as the snow melts into spring. But it can be difficult in the dark of winter.

My husband and I have a mantra when we are going through one of these painful months at church, we remind each other, "Well, you don't work in a coal mine." Of course being a miner is a worthy vocation. I'm not disparaging miners. But I am saying that we're not going to get black lung at the end of the day. There are a lot of people who find joy in their jobs, even when they are much more difficult than ours.

It's not up to our church to make us happy every day, or to tailor the occupation to our whims. Sometimes we work hard in emotionally exhausting situations. Some of our deepest gladness comes after a long difficult struggle. Sometimes, on those really hard days, we need to get up and bring the joy to the job.