

Identity in transition

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I had to have business cards made. It just had to be done. Even if people never use them any longer, they still ask for them. I struggled with what to put on them. I hovered over at the Zazzle site for far too long. Finally I settled on my name, address, email and cell phone. I didn't try to say what I do—a pastor, a blogger, a columnist, an author, an artist, a consultant, an UNCO founder—I didn't know what to list. When the plain, white cards arrived in the mail, I felt bereft, like I had lost something.

I spent seven years as a pastor in D.C. There are many things I learned about life inside the beltway, and one of the biggest things was the sense of job impermanence. With each election, careers would be made or destroyed. With each tremble of the stock market, foundations would cut funding. It usually didn't matter how hard or how well a person worked, it was simply the case that their career could end in a flash. Since the cost of living was so high, the loss of a job often led to financial instability. And since identities were so closely tied to careers, the professional fault line often shook to the core of one's self. Then it crumbled marriages and relationships.

So I often worked with people, trying to untangle a job loss or transition from their sense of purpose, identity and worth. But it's hard. So many of us preach that our jobs are vocations—and when we dig up the linguistic and theological root of “vocation,” we recognize that they are callings. *God calls us*. God made us for a reason. God equipped us with talents and abilities. And we can find meaning by using our skills for a purpose greater than ourselves.

Sometimes this line of thinking can be manipulative, as some sort of middle-class exhortation to go to college, be a professional, and behave within the capitalistic confines of making more and consuming more. Other times it can be liberating, recognizing a calling can allow a person to break the bonds of societal expectations.

The thing about preaching and pastoral care is that we often recognize our own problems in everyone else. I suppose that's why pastors are so often hypocrites—we're always preaching about our own issues. Then we have to live with the words that we doled out. I'm struggling with my own words now, as I look down at my business card with no business listed.

As a clergy couple, our vocations have never been set in stone. It was difficult through our ordination processes, because committees want to hear that you are 100% committed to the pastorate, when there simply are not opportunities 100% of the time.

We thought that we would take turns in our calls—Brian would make one move, and I would make the next move. We've been at it for over 15 years, and it's never that simple. Opportunities don't really line up with our expectations. It's difficult for one pastor to find one church, much less two in the same geographic region.

My husband and I moved to Chattanooga a couple of years ago so that he could start a new church. Which means that we're in it for the long haul here. My first year, my calendar was jam-packed with speaking engagements. My second year, I served Rivermont Presbyterian Church as a part-time parish associate and my speaking relaxed to a more manageable schedule. I left Rivermont a couple of weeks ago. It has been a wonderful parting, as they celebrate the arrival of a full-time Associate. So, I'm back in transition. Juggling speaking and writing assignments. Painting. Expanding UNCO. There are very few opportunities here. Most of the Presbyterians in our town are conservative. They moved to the dark side (PCA) and don't hire women.

And I'm trying to make peace with this business card. I'm looking at my name, soothing myself with the reality that I might always be in transition. And my worth is not in my title. Sometimes it's just in my name.