Paths to ministry

Six ordained people tell their stories

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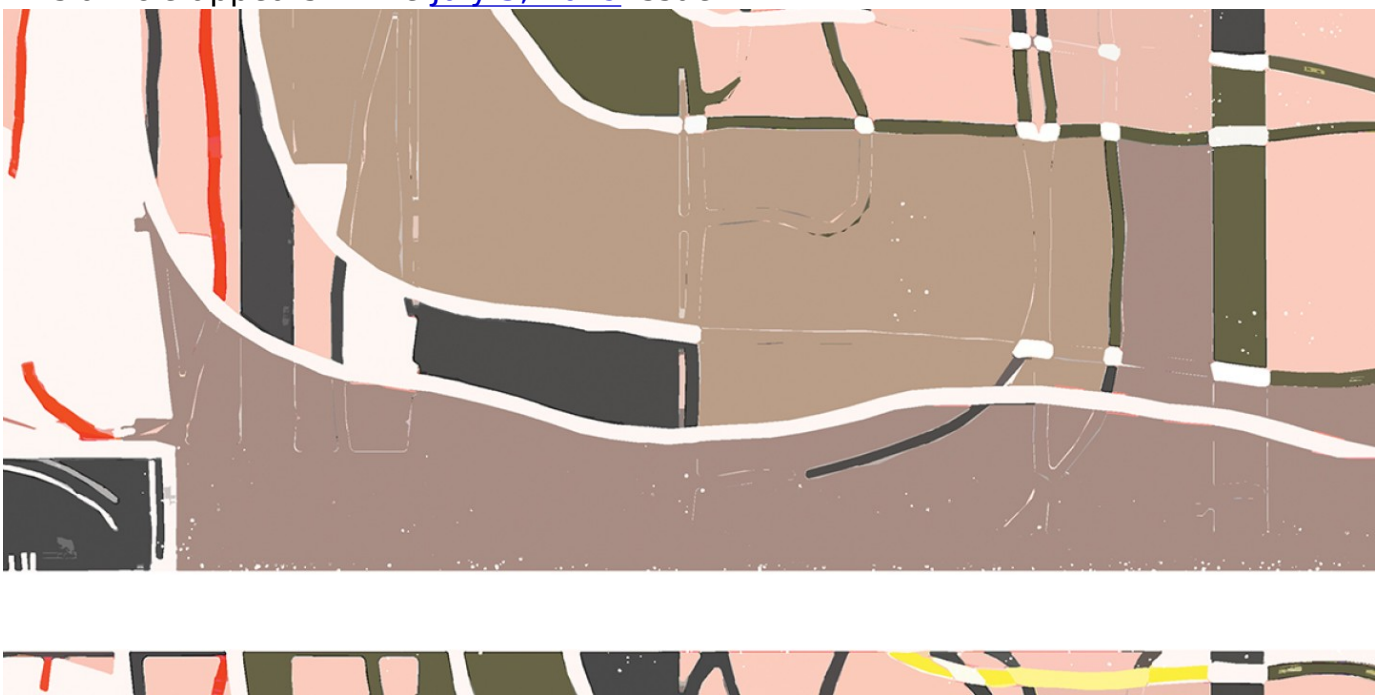

Illustration by Daniel C. Richardson

When I first heard Rabbi Noah Farkas talk about becoming a rabbi (see his story below), I found myself wondering about other stories of vocation and calling. Ministry is a field in which such stories are prominent and privileged. Not many people ask a construction worker, "How did you know that you were called to be a construction worker?" or ask a small business owner, "When did you first want to run a business?" But many people do ask ministers, "How did you discern your call to ministry?" Some denominations have a lengthy and elaborate process for asking that question and confirming a person's answer. Others look for vivid personal testimony. All traditions of ministry rely on some kind of narrative.

The following collection of stories is not intended to be comprehensive or representative. It is meant to evoke and inspire other stories and a broader conversation about the discernment of God's action in our lives. These reflections are part of a tradition rich in complex stories of call, from Hagar to Moses to Esther to Paul. The question, How did God speak to you? is always powerful and revealing. It may elicit stories of heartbreak, denial, uncertainty, or risk. Though I've never felt called to ordained ministry, these stories still speak to me as I try to imagine what it might mean for God to speak in and through my life. —Amy Frykholm

Arthur Boers: Our church hulked solemnly on Scott Street. Varnished, unforgiving timbered pews filled its cavernous space. A massive wooden pulpit dominated. It could be reached by a staircase, a dozen or so steps. The preacher was always preaching and praying well over our heads.

The organ accompanied us, pipes rumbling like God's voice from above, out-thundering our hearty unison singing. Before I could read lyrics, I moved my lips and hummed, wanting to participate. When I could read, I sang so loudly that nearby children looked askance. I liked being noticed, proving my devotion.

But children in worship were told to be seen and not heard, in church like at dinner. If we needed the bathroom, we held it. If we must speak, we whispered. No one raised voices. I remember our shock when a young father carried his boy out in the middle of worship, the tantrum thrower yelling, "You idiot!" We were unsettled not just by the lad's outburst but by the poor parenting that led to this. They obviously had spoiled him.

Church was usually long and slow, but one day that changed. We had a guest speaker: "our" missionary in Nigeria. His parents, hardworking fruit farmers and members of our congregation, sat proudly a few pews away from us.

As I perched with my blond hair slicked, neck constricted by the starched white collar, legs pricked by woolen pants, feet dangling midway between the pew and the parquet, God encountered me.

I looked up at the missionary, a slight man with black horn-rims and shy voice, and felt overcome, knowing that God wanted me. Perhaps I heard a voice, like the one calling Samuel. Maybe an inner certainty washed through me. I don't recall specifics.

But I felt a call, even though the missionary neither invited nor encouraged such a response, and I cannot recall ever hearing anyone speaking of a call, and none of my relatives were ministers, missionaries, or Christian school teachers. Nevertheless, God, I felt sure, wanted me.

My family seldom used religious terminology other than in memorized rote prayers, which had no sense of conversing with God, let alone hearing from God. My parents disparaged religious people and laughed about those who sang pious songs. We respected clergy but knew them to be different. We were down-to-earth and exerted our bodies, doing real work.

Still, I needed to talk about what had happened. My aunt and uncle and their children came over after church for Dutch pastries, *gebakjes*, and coffee. Sitting on the floor, sipping iced orange Freshie, the Canadian equivalent of Kool-Aid, I announced: “At church God told me I’m supposed to work for him, maybe like that missionary.”

The adults said nothing. A cousin laughed, from unease. Others asked no questions, offered no affirmations, but changed the subject: “Did you see how poor those Nigerians are?” “Imagine living in a hut with no running water.” “We are so blessed in Canada.”

I never forgot that call. No one else ever mentioned it.

Arthur Boers is an Anglican priest in Toronto and author, most recently, of Servants and Fools: A Biblical Theology of Leadership *(Abingdon).*

Jennifer Bailey: I grew up in Quincy, a small town in southern Illinois on the Mississippi River, right across from Hannibal, Missouri, where Mark Twain set *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. It is a town that is about 90 percent white and about 10 percent “all other.”

I was one of the “others”: a little black girl whose parents were big-city, college-educated expats from Chicago, who moved to Quincy fresh out of graduate school hoping to add a line to their résumés and move on. Almost 30 years later, my dad is still there. From a young age, I was acutely aware that I was different. My kinky hair could not be easily swept up in ponytails like my friends. In my elementary school

photos, my brown skin is easy to pick out against a sea of white faces.

A week after my 14th birthday I moved to the South Side of Chicago. For my parents, it was a narrative of return. While I was familiar with hum of the streetlamps from summers spent on my grandmother's front stoop, the pace of life was as different as night and day. My high school was and is one of the most ethnically diverse and academically rigorous educational institutions in the state. Walking down the halls, it was not unusual to hear four languages spoken before you made it to class. It was an island of possibility and imagination amid a sea of residential segregation.

These are the communities that shaped me into the city girl with country sensibilities I am today. They gifted me with the ability to be adaptable, finding a sense of comfort wherever I land and a language to connect with whomever is in front of me.

But my faith also prepared me. I belong to the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in which I serve as a clergywoman. My denomination was founded in 1787 and established out of a sense of racial and cultural injustice.

Growing up in Quincy, my church was the one place where I was made to feel fully human and feel whole. It was the space where I was taught that my blackness was beautiful and that I was beloved in God's sight.

When the tragedy of 9/11 occurred two weeks after I started high school, my instinct was toward a posture of love even as our national discourse strategically began to otherize brown-skinned people like me—people like my new friends in homeroom, whose parents were from Palestine and Pakistan. What hurt the most was that some of the most vile rhetoric I heard came from some of the very church pulpits that had been a source of strength and identity for me.

Rather than be complacent, I got involved with a group called Interfaith Youth Core, which ran programs for high school and college students in Chicago on interfaith cooperation. There I met friends who were Muslim, Bahai, Jewish, and Christian. We did service projects and engaged in interfaith dialogue. Along with the black church, that experience deeply shaped my worldview. It was an opportunity to be the gospel by engaging those who were different from me. It was an invitation to build a more deeply loving world. It solidified my commitment to creating spaces that are just and equitable, and where everyone can flourish.

Jennifer Bailey is founder and executive director of Faith Matters Network and an ordained itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Rabbi Noah Farkas: Judaism does not often speak about a “calling,” as many of my Christian brothers and sisters do. Not many of us rabbis feel called by God. Often rabbis choose their profession because of a deep interest in Judaism and the Jewish people. After all, the word *rabbi* means master teacher.

The closest I’ve come to feeling called was during the summer before I began rabbinical studies. I had already been accepted to seminary and had some time on my hands. I decided to volunteer in Ghana for the summer. I lived in a tiny village on the Atlantic coast with no electricity or running water. For two months I brought my unskilled hands and optimistic spirit to a construction site, where I helped to mix concrete and form bricks for a new elementary school. In the evenings I would read by gaslight and chat with my new Ghanaian friends. I felt strong and powerful because I could see that I was helping a community coming up in the world. I was doing something important.

The day before heading home, I traveled to Ghana’s capital city, Accra, where my friends and I had planned a celebratory dinner in a small restaurant near the airport. In a few hours I’d be on a plane to London, then home to start seminary. My adult life was about to begin. When I got out of the taxi, it was raining and the air was thick with fog and smoke from burning trash. I looked over at the sewer and there, lying away from everything else, with red muddy water streaming by her, was the languishing body of a young girl. Her distended stomach and jaundiced eyes, her painful look of despair, grabbed me. This little girl lying quietly in the rain looked up at me, and we locked eyes.

In that instant, I froze. I was stronger than I ever had been. I had used my privilege to help build a school. I was young. Sinew and bone had hardened under my skin as I mixed stone, sand, and water for hours. I had climbed mountains and scaled waterfalls. I had danced in funeral parades. I had learned to speak a serviceable Ewe. I had fished in the sea with other young men. I taught English. I felt on fire every day I worked in Ghana. Yet looking at that child suffer in the sewer, I felt powerless.

I felt like she saw right through me. It was in that one moment that I saw for the first time the maw that separates *olam hazeh*, this world, from *olam haba*, the world of redemption. Seeing this nameless girl dying before me was like seeing the demarcation between God's dreams and our actions. I felt the call not so much as a clear prophecy from God but as a clarion cry of suffering innocence. I heard, louder than the mighty shout of "I am the Lord," the silent woe of a suffering child.

My friends grabbed me and pulled me inside. Needless to say I had no appetite. I was mixed up and confused about what had just happened. I couldn't process this moment with them. I kept it inside and wrote it down in my journal. When I returned outside, I looked for her. She was gone. Maybe someone saved her. Maybe she was swept away. I just don't know. It haunts me still.

Two weeks later I sat in my first Talmud class. When I went to Africa I knew I wanted to be a rabbi. I love the Torah and the Jewish people. When I came home, I knew what I wanted to do with my rabbinate. To bridge the gap. To take pain away. To cross the chasm between oblivion and redemption. Since then, I have worked in many different ways at home and abroad to alleviate suffering and fight for justice. It's more than a calling. It's a command from God to do what is good—to act justly and love mercy and to walk with humility in God's shadow.

Rabbi Noah Farkas serves at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California. In 2016, he was recognized as one of America's most inspiring rabbis by the Forward.

Paul Hegele: I never should have been a preacher. Common sense and a speech defect from childhood told me to keep my mouth shut. As a child I was embarrassed that people had trouble understanding my words and that less-than-kind fellow students snickered when I spoke. My solution: I seldom said anything. My answers to teachers' questions were short and mumbled. Some teachers thought I was a dunce. The only thing I mastered was humility.

When my teenage years struck, I had orange hair and two left feet. I was overweight, and I stood a head taller than my classmates. Worst of all was the speech impediment. Small-town Ohio in the early 1960s had few speech therapists, and the ones who occasionally pulled me out of class to tell me how to speak properly were soon frustrated and gave up.

Better for me to live quietly in my books, I decided. I was comfortable in my world of reading, and I inhaled histories, biographies, Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, and the Bible. The last thing in the world I ever would dream of doing was speaking in public.

Then, at the end of my high school years, a new speech therapist arrived. Instead of asking me to mimic him he taught me the theory of speech. He taught how the lips, tongue, teeth, and throat worked together to create sound. He taught speech as a concept. Now I was in the world of ideas, a world I understood. I soon found that with concentration and my deep voice I could make sounds that resembled the daily fare of Walter Cronkite. Like the Greek orator Demosthenes in my history books, I put marbles in my mouth and learned to speak loudly and clearly. If I thought before I spoke, my words could be understood and even appreciated. My childhood friends were amazed to hear the redheaded sphinx speak.

In time I went back to that stained-glass place where I had never been judged, a place of good humor and gracious pastors. It was the place that taught biblical stories of how God can transform a tricky Jacob into an Israel and a surly Saul into a St. Paul. What could God do with me? In that place of miracles I became not only a pastor, I became a preacher. And now whenever I step into the pulpit I think I hear, high above, the faint sound of heavenly laughter.

Paul Hegele is a Lutheran pastor in Newport Beach, California.

Erica L. Brown: As a child, I loved going to church. It meant a break from the dreaded saddle shoes I wore daily on my very narrow feet. At church I wore black patent leather Mary Janes. Church meant hoping for a seat close to the associate pastor when he visited our Sunday school class. Church meant familiarity. I knew every square inch of that church: the best hiding places and which preschool rooms had the best toys. Most of all, church meant a building full of people who cared for me and my family.

In college I watched helplessly as my mother, the chair of the staff-parish relations committee, dealt with complaints of sexual harassment against the pastor—including a complaint she herself had made. This was uncharted territory. I came away angry—angry at the way my mother was treated, and angry with the minister for abusing his power. I was also angry with the congregants, who refused to believe or support my mom. And I was most angry with God.

Broken and bruised, I had a conversation with Marty Cash Burless, the chaplain at Mount Union College, where I was a senior. She told me it would be OK if I needed to step back from the whole church thing for a bit. God would be OK with that. “Take the time you need!” I somehow breathed a little easier.

A year later I ended up at Bucknell University. On my first Sunday morning there, with my belongings piled in my mom’s car, I had nowhere to go and knew no one. I felt more vulnerable than I ever had in my life. I stopped and thought, “What if you were at Mount Union? You’d find Marty, and she’d help you. Find the chaplain. She’ll help you.”

After the service in the chapel, I hung around at the back, looking and feeling ragged. I had met Alison Boden, the chaplain, on a previous visit to campus. I recognized her and gingerly made my way over. “You probably don’t remember me . . .” I began.

“Oh, of course I do. You’re the Methodist from Ohio.” I melted into a puddle of tears. “Well, this Methodist from Ohio has no place to go.” Alison calmly helped me come to a solution.

I went to another chapel service, if only to thank her. In the back pew, poised for a quick getaway, I had my arms crossed tightly over my chest, making it clear that I didn’t want company. The title of the sermon was “Holy Anger.” I don’t remember what Alison said beyond the notion that sometimes anger is holy, righteous, and appropriate. The thought that perhaps it had been OK to be feeling as I did crept in. The recessional hymn was “Love Divine All Loves Excelling.” One verse reads, “Suddenly return and never, nevermore, thy temples leave.” Tears streaming down my face, I had returned. Only time would tell if it was never to leave.

During my time at Bucknell, I started to make sense of some of the things troubling me. I found myself tentatively telling Alison that I was thinking I might want to attend divinity school. I hardly believed it, even as I heard the words spoken. Alison smiled and said she had had a feeling for some time, but thought I needed to come to that conclusion on my own.

Yet the anger I was feeling was coming perilously close to freezing into hatred, as feminist theologian Beverly Harrison might have said. I had two choices: keep throwing stones at stained-glass windows or take those stones and fashion a different understanding of what it means to be the church. Something filled with

integrity and honesty, and difficult questions without easy answers. I chose to stop throwing stones.

During my time at the University of Chicago Divinity School, I still worried that much of my call to ministry was built upon anger. An antagonistic relationship with my teaching pastor did not help matters. After a Bible study one evening, several congregants were talking about taking swing dance lessons. I quietly said that I wasn't much of a dancer. Apparently I was not quiet enough because my teaching pastor heard and chuckled wholeheartedly as she replied, "Well, that doesn't surprise me!" I shrugged it off.

But the recessional hymn at my ordination ceremony was "Siyahamba." As the music started playing, a friend came up to the front of the sanctuary and took me by the hand. We danced down the aisle, all inhibitions gone—angry mourning turned into joyful dance. Many in the congregation followed suit. Together we danced out of the sanctuary.

Erica L. Brown is pastor at Howland Community Church in Warren, Ohio.

William H. Willimon: My sophomore dream trip to Europe (envisioned as a 24-hour-a-day, three-month bacchanal) got commandeered suddenly one day in Amsterdam. In the Rijksmuseum, while my buddies explored the city, I stood face to face with paintings I'd seen only as slides in Art History 101 at Wofford College. I stood and wondered before a melancholy Rembrandt self-portrait. To my right, an older man intently studied a Van Ruisdael. He looked familiar, but who would I know so far from home?

Dr. Marney! He had a week or so of gray beard, but there he was: Carlyle Marney. Six months before, Marney (as he preferred to be called) had come to Wofford College's annual Religious Emphasis Week and had shaken up many of us with his prophetic sermons. His deep voice had sounded like God, if Yahweh had been a Baptist from Tennessee. He swore, even in sermons, and made outrageous comments meant to thrill sophomores like me.

"Dr. Marney?"

"Who the hell are you?" he replied, looking me up and down cautiously.

“Oh, just a student at Wofford, where you spoke last spring,” I said. Marney stood there, assessing me.

“Why are you here?” he demanded.

“Me? I’m just bumming around Europe with some guys, looking for girls, having a good time.”

“You take me for some kind of fool, boy? I’ve been a preacher long enough to know when somebody is lying to me!”

“Uh, then I guess I don’t know why I’m here,” I stammered.

“Good! Maybe we can get somewhere. Unamuno: knowing that you don’t know is the beginning of knowledge. Let me help.”

He grabbed my arm. “These Dutch have told me more truth than I can take in one afternoon. God, I need a drink. You?”

Marney led me down the steps and into the first bar outside the museum.

“Got bourbon?” he called to a waiter across the dim, smoky bar. “Doesn’t need to be fine bourbon. This boy doesn’t know the difference, and I don’t expect good mash this far from home. Two. Straight up.”

Watching Marney fiddle with his pipe, I was excited. I felt I was being taken somewhere dangerous.

“Now that you’ve got some liquor in you,” he said after his first sip, “you ready to talk? No horseshit. Who brought you here? What’s the reason you won’t admit?”

Marney began tamping sweet-smelling tobacco into his pipe.

“Uh, I thought I was here just to see Europe. My first time and all. I really like art history . . .”

“You started this,” mumbled Marney, accusingly, settling back in his chair, then closing his eyes, waiting for me to say something of interest.

“When you were speaking at Wofford, I got to thinking, or else I finally admitted to myself that I had been thinking, that maybe I ought to think about applying for one of those Rockefeller grants for a trial year at seminary, but . . .”

Marney grinned as if he had finally figured me out. “Son, life’s less monologue and more dialogue.”

“It’s just I’m really bothered that I’d be thinking about seminary. It seems kinda crazy,” I said nervously.

“Why crazy?” asked Marney, staring across the bar, feigning disinterest, puffing on his pipe.

I began a rambling narration. “I grew up without a father, you see. My father left us when . . .”

Marney shook his head. “No. Your daddy can abscond, die, disown, but everybody’s got some daddy or another. I bet you went out and found one, didn’t you? Besides, how the devil does not having a daddy explain you here, now? God’s of the living, not the dead.”

I was grateful for the table between us. I blurted, “You see, since I’ve been at college I’ve read Freud, and I’m thinking, maybe my fixation on God is just my compensation for my lack of a father while I was growing up. Wish fulfillment, maybe.”

“Probably,” smirked Marney.

“My thinking about God is just my psychological reaction to my daddy being in prison and all?”

“Look,” said Marney, laying aside his pipe and moving toward me across the table as if aggravated at having to explain the obvious. “Son, God will use any handle he can get.” Silence.

“But, how can I figure out what’s God and what’s my own screwed-up background?”

In an exhale of smoke Marney pronounced, “Son, God will take advantage of any messed-up background, crooked daddy, manipulative mama. Read the scriptures, for God’s sake! I swear, I’ve never known a preacher worth a damn who didn’t have a bad mama or daddy problem. God can work with either. Be glad you only got one loss for God to take advantage of.

“Yep. I’m pretty sure God’s got your name. Not the first time I’ve heard this story. You’re nobody special. Got God’s fingerprints all over it. You got time for me to have another one of these?” he said, pointing to his empty glass.

“My good man,” he shouted to the waiter. “This round, don’t spoil it with ice. My protégé likes it straight. Garçon, encore bourbon!”

Sometime before dawn, tossing and turning on the dirty mattress in the fleabag monastic cell that three of us had rented for eight dollars a night, accompanied by the sound of some student puking in the shared toilet down the hall, I said the words that Paul surely prayed when God blinded him: Why not somebody else? What kind of God would call somebody like me? I don’t want to be a Methodist preacher.

William H. Willimon teaches at Duke Divinity School. This essay is adapted from his memoir Accidental Preacher*, forthcoming from Eerdmans.*

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