

Called to Serve—A Discussion about the Divine Call

Leader's Guide

Slide #1: Bible study title

Slide #2: Introduction

Even though our congregations and members have experience with and some knowledge of the divine call and how it works, there are times when members display a lack of understanding of the call and how it works. The 2021 synod convention encouraged the Conference of Presidents to address this issue with Bible studies and perhaps a series of instructive articles in *Forward in Christ*.

This Bible study is intended to provide an overview of the biblical doctrine of the divine call, as well as information regarding how the calling process is carried out in our synod. The call itself is something established by God in love for his church. The process of applying that doctrine in a practical way is a matter that God has left to his church to determine. We pray that addressing both of these aspects of the call and the call process will lead to a better understanding of the doctrine and of the process we have agreed to use.

Slide #3: Questions for today

This slide provides an overview of the questions this Bible study will address.

- *What exactly is the divine call into the public ministry of the gospel?* The first section of the study lays the biblical groundwork for the way that God provides workers in his church. It should be emphasized that the call itself is not a human invention, but something established by God for the good of his church and for its mission of faithfully proclaiming God's truth to both believers and unbelievers. The differences between calling and hiring will also be explored.
- *How does the call process work?* God has established the divine call into the public ministry of the gospel, but he has left it to his church to determine how a person is chosen to serve in the public ministry. Distinction will need to be made between the "priesthood of all believers" or "personal ministry" in which every Christian has the privilege and responsibility of proclaiming law and gospel in their vocations, and the "public" or "representative" ministry in which individuals carry out the work of the ministry in the name of and on behalf of a group of Christians. The process that our synod uses will be explained, not as a process that is "inspired" or perfect but as one that we, as Christian brothers and sisters, have agreed to follow.
- *How does someone decide whether to accept or decline a call?* This discussion will explore what factors a called worker should and should not consider when deciding a call.

- *What are things to remember when serving in a call?* Congregational members should be aware of the high expectations that God places on those who are called to serve in the public ministry. They also need to be aware of the challenges and temptations that called workers experience so that they can provide encouragement and support.
- *What are the blessings for the called worker and for those who are served?* God provides special blessings to those who are privileged to serve in the public ministry. Reviewing those blessings will be an encouragement to called workers and will also be an encouragement for young people to consider training for the public ministry. God also blesses his people through the faithful efforts of called workers; God's people should be reminded of those blessings.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. What are some of the questions you've always had about the divine call?**
- 2. What will be the benefit of having a better understanding of the doctrine of the divine call and the process used in our synod to call pastors, teachers, and staff ministers?**

Slides #4-5: What is the priesthood of all believers?

Here is the opportunity to begin to make a clear distinction between the “priesthood of all believers” (sometimes called the “universal priesthood” or “personal ministry”) and the public ministry.

Emphasis should be made on the fact that every believer has complete access to God through Christ, with no human intermediary or priest required. The priesthood of all believers also means that every Christian has been called by God to use the means of grace to carry out the mission that God has given to every believer. It's in their role as priests before God that believers have been given the privilege and responsibility to use God's Word to call people to repentance (the law), to receive another's confession of sin, and to assure sinners of their forgiveness in Christ (the gospel). God has given all believers the mission to take the gospel of Christ and make disciples of all nations.

For a good summary of Luther's teaching on the priesthood of all believers, see <https://credomag.com/2020/01/luthers-doctrine-of-the-priesthood-of-all-believers-the-importance-for-today/>.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. What is the importance of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in your life?**
- 2. What are your responsibilities as a member of the priesthood of all believers?**

Slide #6: What is the public ministry?

Because they are members of the priesthood of all believers, Christians have been entrusted to use the means of grace as they interact with other Christians and share the gospel with non-Christians. In addition to that, God has established the public ministry, where individuals are chosen by fellow

Christians to preach and administer the means of grace *in their name and on their behalf*. This is done in a *public* way, namely, that the group which calls the individual has made it known that the called person represents them and carries out ministry in their name and on their behalf.

DISCUSSION:

1. **What are the benefits to the church of having people serve in representative ministry? (Think, for example, of the benefit of having one person who normally baptizes or who normally administers the Lord's Supper.)**

Slide #7: What is the public ministry?

The office of the public ministry of the gospel is not something that human beings have created or established. God himself has established the public ministry of the gospel as he cares for and builds his church. That is why we say that the person who has been called into the public ministry receives a *divine call—a call not from people but from God himself*.

DISCUSSION:

1. **If a call is *divine (from God)*, give practical examples of why it is important (both for the called workers and for the congregation) for the call to be from God.**

Slide #8: What is the public ministry?

The call to serve in the public ministry is not something that a person assumes on his or her own. The person does not simply “decide” that he or she will serve in a specific ministry or a place of his or her own choosing. The office is not something to be sought or pursued by a person in keeping with his or her own desires. Rather, God chooses and calls the person to the place and ministry he determines.

DISCUSSION:

1. **Why would it be wrong for a person to seek out or pursue a ministry or a ministry location of his or her own choosing?**
2. **When is it proper for a called worker to express a desire to the district president to be considered for calls to other locations? When is it *not* proper?**

Slide #9: What is the public ministry?

The Lutheran Confessions state the biblical principle that the public ministry is not something that people assume for themselves. To function in the public ministry, a person needs to be called by God through his church.

DISCUSSION:

1. **Why do the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions insist that a person who desires to serve in the public ministry can only do so if “properly called”?**

Slide #10: What *exactly* is the public ministry?

Called ministers of the gospel do not invent the message on their own. The message that should be preached and taught comes only from God and his Word.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. What are the dangers if called workers speak their own words rather than God's?**
- 2. What responsibility does the congregation have to ensure that its called workers are proclaiming God's Word and not something else?**

Slide #11: What is the public ministry?

While God himself established the office of the gospel ministry, he allows his church to define the *scope and function* of that ministry. To accomplish that, the church may find certain offices or types of ministries necessary and beneficial (such as the church in Jerusalem establishing the office of deacon because it was needed). The pastoral ministry is the broadest in scope, since the pastor is called to be the shepherd of the entire flock. Other ministries, such as teacher or staff minister, are narrower in scope and function, but they are still offices of the public ministry. The church is also able to establish specialized ministries, such as synod and district officers, school presidents, administrators, etc.

Some Lutheran churches (such as the Missouri Synod) teach that the only specific office of ministry that God established was the parish pastor and that all other offices of ministry (such as a Lutheran elementary school teacher) are auxiliary to the pastoral office. They can be said to be serving in public ministry insofar as they are carrying out functions of the pastoral office. WELS teaches that God established the public ministry and allows the church to create offices according to need and benefit.

Anyone who carries out means of grace public ministry can do so only because he or she has been formally called by a group of Christians to serve in their name and on their behalf. The offices of ministry can be full time. Other offices, such as Sunday school teachers or elders who assist the pastor in distributing the Lord's Supper and visiting members, are part time and often are called informally by the congregation.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. If the pastor's office is the broadest in scope, does that mean other offices are less than divine or are less important? Why or why not?**

Slide #12: What is the public ministry?

God emphasizes the importance of the public ministry by establishing clear personal qualifications for those who serve.

- **Above reproach:** Called workers should be careful not to act or speak in such a way that others can condemn their actions and thus take away from their effectiveness in teaching the Word of God.
- **The husband of one wife:** Marriage is to be honored by called workers and they should not do anything in their marriage to bring shame to the ministry.
- **Temperate and self-controlled:** Called workers need to guard against excesses in behavior and speech; they need to be careful what they do and say, so as not to drive people away from their message and ministry.
- **Respectable:** People should be able to look at called workers and recognize that they are worthy of respect and honor. Actions by a called worker that cause people to lose respect for them damage not just them but their ministry.
- **Hospitable:** Called workers need to be friendly and welcoming to those they know and to those they do not know.
- **Able to teach:** Serving in the ministry requires more than knowledge; it requires the ability to impart that knowledge to others in a way that can be understood.
- **Not given to drunkenness:** Self-control when it comes to the use of alcohol is vital.
- **Not violent but gentle:** Called workers should never resort to bullying or threats; they should be kind, winsome, and persuasive.
- **Not a lover of money:** Called workers will remember that they are not in the ministry to become rich. They also should not set a poor example by complaining or worrying about money.
- **Must manage his own family well:** No called worker will be a perfect parent, but they do need to strive to bring up their children with proper discipline.

DISCUSSION:

1. **God has set some high standards for those who serve in the public ministry. Why?**
2. **Does this list of qualifications mean that called workers will be perfect and will not fall down in one or more of these areas? Why or why not?**
3. **What is the importance of having called workers set a proper example for the members of a congregation? How can they be a positive example even when they fall short as a Christian?**

Slide #13: What is the public ministry?

Review the way in which called workers are trained in WELS.

High school students who desire to train for the public ministry can go to public high schools, area Lutheran high schools, or WELS preparatory schools. The WELS preparatory schools exist for the sole purpose of training future called workers; more than 50% of their graduates go on to Martin Luther College.

On the college level, those training to become pastors, teachers, or staff ministers receive their undergraduate training at Martin Luther College. Teachers and staff ministers who graduate from Martin Luther College are prepared to enter the teaching ministry or serve as staff ministers. Those students preparing to be pastors continue after Martin Luther College to Wisconsin Lutheran

Seminary. At Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, students attend classes for three years and receive practical pastoral training in the vicar year.

The synod does offer special programs in all three types of ministry for non-traditional students.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. Why does our synod have such a rigorous and thorough training system for called workers?**
- 2. What are some special aspects of training that you believe are very important?**

Slides #14-17: How does someone become a public minister?

While there were times in the past that God called individuals directly to the public ministry (immediately, with no intermediary), since New Testament times, God calls people into the public ministry indirectly through his church (mediately). Even though the call comes through the church, it is still a call from God, and therefore no less divine.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. Is there any difference between calls that God made immediately and those that are made mediately?**
- 2. How was the calling done by the church in Jerusalem similar to how we do it today? How was it different?**
- 3. What are ways in which human sinfulness and weakness might insert themselves into the issuing of a call? Even when that happens, of what can we be certain?**

Slide #18: How does the WELS call process work?

God has not mandated a specific process for the church to call people to serve in the public ministry. Various Christian churches use different processes, and there is nothing inherently wrong with that. The process WELS has put into place is not divinely mandated. Rather, it is a process that we, in Christian freedom, have agreed to use for the sake of good order and for the benefit of the church.

There are several different ways in which the call process is used in our synod.

The assignment of candidates

When men and women graduate from Martin Luther College or when men graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (or when they begin their vicar year), their calls come to them through the assignment process.

By presenting themselves for assignment, these young people are publicly saying that they are willing to go wherever the Lord calls them.

A special committee called the Assignment Committee has the task of assigning graduates and vicars to their calls. The Assignment Committee is composed of the 12 district presidents and the

synod president and vice presidents. The presidents of the four synodical schools, school personnel, and WELS administrators serve as advisors to the Assignment Committee.

Congregations submit their requests for called workers to their district presidents. They inform the district president of the scope of the call and of any special skills or abilities that might be needed. The district presidents then bring these requests to the Assignment Committee. The Assignment Committee considers these requests one by one and strives to find candidates who best fit the needs of the call. A district president makes a motion to assign a candidate to a given place, and the entire Assignment Committee votes on each assignment.

Candidates have expressed a willingness to go wherever they are assigned, but there are exceptions to that general rule. Candidates assigned to a foreign mission, to Canada, and to Alaska are given the right to decline such a call because of the special demands and hardships required. If a candidate declines such a call, he or she is assigned to another place of service.

Some assignments are for a limited time (usually one year). Some reasons for one-year calls: The candidate is assigned to a position for which he or she is not specifically trained, such as a teacher whose gifts indicate that he or she would be best suited to lower grades but then is assigned to teach upper grades; candidates are assigned as dormitory supervisors for one year (thus delaying their service in a congregation or classroom); female teachers who plan to marry within a year or two; a situation in which a congregation does not know whether the worker will be needed beyond one year. The candidate then returns to the Assignment Committee when that time has been completed.

Calls to synod and district positions

Calls to synod and district positions are issued through an election process at synod and district conventions. A person elected to such a position is called to the position for a set term by means of the election.

Professors at synodical schools are called by the governing boards of the schools. At Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, nominations for these positions are made by the voting members of the synod.

Calls to synodical administrative positions are issued by the various synodical groups that oversee them (Conference of Presidents, Board for World Missions, Board for Home Missions, etc.).

DISCUSSION:

- 1. In WELS there are different ways in which calls are extended. There are also different groups who extend calls. How do these various ways of doing things illustrate the saying, “God calls the workers, but he gives the church the freedom to decide how that is carried out”? Could we decide to carry out the call process in a different way?**

Slide #19: How does the WELS call process work?

This slide highlights the importance of a congregation first evaluating its ministry needs and then sharing those needs with the district president.

DISCUSSION:

1. **What kinds of congregational needs and corresponding skills/abilities of a pastor can be helpful for a congregation to discuss when there is a vacancy?**

Slide #20: How does the WELS call process work?

When a district president is asked to prepare a call list for a congregation, he will keep in mind the needs that the congregation has identified for him. He uses the synod's database (that contains biographical and service information as well as areas of ministry interest expressed by the called workers). In the case of teachers and staff ministers, he enlists the help of the Commission on Lutheran Schools, who are more familiar with their backgrounds. In some cases, the district president seeks input from other district presidents or other called workers. Often the district president knows candidates from his relationship with them as their district president.

Sometimes the district president may know of a qualified candidate, but he decides not to use his or her name on the call list. This may be due to a brief length of time that the person is serving in his or her current call; it may be that the person has received another call very recently, and it's important for the worker not to receive too many calls in a short period of time; or at times there may be situations in a congregation that indicate it would not be good for the called worker to leave.

DISCUSSION:

1. **How does a district president do his research?**
2. **What factors will lead a district president NOT to use a name on a call list?**
3. **There is some variation in the amount of biographical information that each district president provides. Why is it not a bad thing that this may vary from district to district?**

Slide #21: How does the WELS call process work?

DISCUSSION:

1. **Why do we choose not to use interviews or "audition" sermons?**
2. **What are the pros and cons of providing more information on a candidate?**

Slides #22-23: How does the WELS call process work?

DISCUSSION:

1. **What are ways in which a vacancy can help a congregation?**

Slide #24: The decision process

DISCUSSION:

1. If a call is divine (from God), why does the called worker have a choice or decision?
2. How can receiving a call benefit the called worker and the congregation?
3. Why is it important for the called worker who has received a call to gather input from a lot of people?

Slide #25: The decision process

DISCUSSION:

1. How will input from the members of the congregation help the person who has received a call?
2. What kind of encouragement will be helpful?

Slides #26-27: The decision process

Three different kinds of factors relate to the decision process.

First, there are those *things that a called worker should not consider*; they are either not important or they are not factors that should influence the decision. Examples of such things that should NOT be considered: a desirable location (nicer town, mountains, beach, golf courses); a nicer parsonage; preferred climate; recreational activities that match personal desires; higher salary (more on this later); easier workload with fewer challenges; need to leave friends and family.

Second, there are those things that, as humans, we will think about and consider, *but they will not in and of themselves determine the final decision*. Examples would be: family considerations, such as education options or the desire to be near an aging parent; health considerations (is there someone in the family that doctors have said needs a specific kind of climate or to be near a suitable medical facility?); financial support and salary (but only if the salary provided is not enough to support my family); do I need a new challenge because my ministry has plateaued or stalled?

Third, there are *the two key questions* that should determine the decision: Where can my God-given talents and skills accomplish the most for God's kingdom? Where will my own weaknesses and limitations do the least harm?

DISCUSSION:

1. Why is it important for the called worker who receives a call to keep these three categories in mind when considering the call?
2. How can input from others help the called worker to do this?
3. What roles do spouse and family play in the decision process?

Slide #28: How should a called worker regard the call in which he or she serves?

This is practical advice to help called workers remember what it is that they do and whom they serve. These attitudes will help a called worker keep the proper perspective and retain a God-pleasing attitude.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. What kind of damage can result if a called worker does not remember these truths?**
- 2. How can church members help called workers to think in these ways?**

Slide #29: What will called workers always want to remember?

God does not expect every called worker to produce the same results in ministry. He will bless some ministries more visibly than others. God does not expect a called worker to be someone he or she is not. The one thing God expects is faithfulness.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. How might that truth be encouraging to both called workers and those whom they serve?**

Slides #30-31: Practical advice for those who serve

DISCUSSION:

- 1. Why are these pieces of advice important?**
- 2. Does being an example of Christian living mean that a called worker must be perfect?**
- 3. What is the proper balance between calling and family?**

Slides #32-33: Blessings given and received by the called worker

Serving as a called worker is a beautiful blend of blessings that God gives to others through the called worker and the blessings that called workers receive as they carry out their callings.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. Why should called workers constantly remind themselves of the blessings of serving in a call?**

Slide #34: Advice to those who are served

Called workers are a blessing from God. They need support, encouragement, thanks, and prayers. Be a blessing to them, just as God uses them to be a blessing to you. Some congregations have established “called worker care committees” to see to it that these types of support are provided.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. What are some practical ways that congregations can express their thanks and support to called workers?**