

MESSENGER STUDYGUIDE

Food for thought, questions for discussion, and activities to help individuals, classes, and small groups use Messenger as a focus for study and reflection.

April 2005

Food for Thought: An Overview of the Issue

Vocation for Christian ministry, and the role of the church in how ministers are called and formed, are the focus of a series of articles:

- Wally Landes writes about how teaching churches are “Aiding and Abetting God’s Call” (pp. 8-9);
- Dennis Lohr writes about his church’s work to provide internships for ministers in training in “What We Did on Our Summer Vacation” (pp. 10-11);
- Beth Gunzel and others tell of their personal experiences in Ministry Summer Service in “A Firm Foundation for Future Ministry” (pp. 12-13);
- Jill Kline explains the Theological Exploration of Vocation program at the Brethren colleges in “A Time of Stretching and Discovery” (pp. 14-16);
- Bethany Seminary’s part in ministry formation is the topic of “Ministry Formation That Really Sings” by Tara Hornbacker (p. 17); and
- Fred Bernhard tells his own story of calling in “The Importance of ‘The Call’” (p. 18).

The Old Testament book highlighted in April’s Journey Through the Word is “**Numbers**: The Book of the March” (p. 20-21). Harold Martin examines Number’s structure and spiritual truths.

Activities: Connecting with the Content

Read some biblical stories of calling to ministry: the calling of Samuel in 1 Samuel 3:1-4:1; the calling of some of Jesus’ disciples in Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 2:13-17; and the calling of Paul in Acts 8:1-3 and 9:1-22. **Look for** other stories of calling to ministry, in the newspaper, on television, at the library, in your church library, on the Internet. **Think about** how people are called to ministry in the biblical stories of calling, and in the contemporary stories of calling that you find. Where and how do you see God take part in these experiences of calling?

Read Numbers 13:1-14:38, the story of the spies sent into Canaan and the Israelites lack of trust in God’s promise. **Remember** a personal experience in which you “looked a gift horse in the mouth”—an experience in which you doubted the worth of something promised to you. For example, you were invited on a blind date, but you backed out at the last minute; or you were offered what seemed like a good job, but on further examination you decided it wasn’t right for you. **Write down** the experience, and how it ended, as you remember it. **Then write a fictional short story** from the same experience, now asking the question, How would this story have ended if I had accepted the promise without question?

Questions for Discussion

1. Write a definition of the word “vocation.” If you are using this study as an individual, come up with a definition of vocation that works for you personally. If you are studying with a group, write a definition together. Consult dictionaries, the Bible, and other reference sources in coming up with a definition. What does vocation mean in regard to Christian ministry? the church? discipleship? a Christian lifestyle? What are the areas of life to which the word “vocation” is applicable?
2. What roles can the church—congregationally, denominationally, and at the district level—play in training and preparing a person for Christian ministry? What church roles and activities are addressed by Landes on pp. 8-9? What church roles and activities are addressed by Lohr on pp. 10-11? What makes a congregation an “optimal setting” for a ministry intern?
3. If your congregation is listed as a ministry teaching site on p. 10, talk with congregational leaders about the experience of being a teaching church for ministers in training. What has the congregation learned from the experience? How has the congregation changed because of the experience? Where are your congregation’s interns now? What are they doing with their lives? Are they continuing their training, are they continuing in Christian ministry, are they working in another ministry of service to the world?
4. If your congregation is not listed as a ministry teaching site on p. 10, discuss these questions, asked by Landes: “What is your congregation willing to do to assist in forming the next generation of ministers? Can you see your fellowship as part of the growing cadre of self-identified teaching churches? Perhaps more pointedly, is your congregation willing to deal with the consequences of not helping persons prepare for ministry?”
5. Which of the many individual stories of vocation, calling, or training for ministry—told on pp. 12-16 and 18—touches you most personally? And why? What is your own story of vocation and calling as a Christian? What do you consider to be your Christian vocation? To what ministry or ministries are you called in the name of Jesus Christ? How has your own journey of faith been a “time of stretching and discovery”? Who has helped call you to be a Christian, and who has helped call you to the ministries you carry out as a disciple of Christ? What role has the church—congregation, district, and denomination—played in your journey of calling and discipleship?
6. How does Martin explain the structure of the book of Numbers? Why does he call it “the book of the march”? What is the promise of God to the people of Israel, that lies at the heart of the book?
7. What types of spiritual truth does Martin find in Numbers? How do these truths connect with the New Testament, and with our faith in Jesus Christ? What signs of hope do you find in these truths? How is God in control, despite the “sad reading” (p. 21) in Numbers?

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