

Daily Devotions from the URC

8 Reflections on Vocation

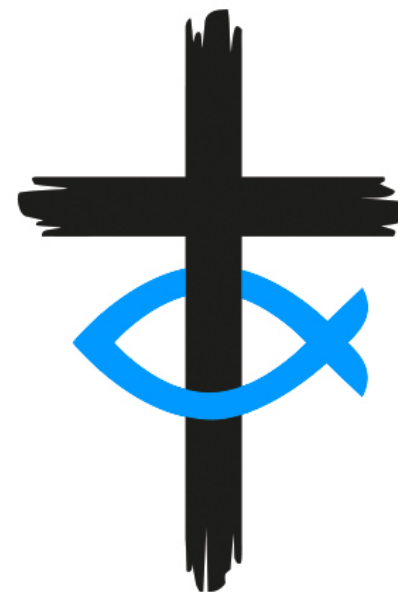


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Introduction

In the URC we observe Vocations Sunday on the 4th Sunday of Easter. In order to help us reflect on this we have prepared 8 devotions on the broad theme of vocations - recognising we are all called. These Devotions can be used at any time of the year – not just around Vocations Sunday.

David Reynolds, who serves as an Elder at Corrs End in Buckinghamshire, reflects on baptism as the starting point for all Christians. Leo Roberts, the Children and Youth Development Officer for our North Western Synod, reflects on our call to serve in the world whilst the Moderator of the South Western Synod, Ruth Whitehead, reflects on servanthood - as our basic approach in the world. Some are called to specific tasks of leadership and John Proctor, our General Secretary, reflects on this whilst Gordon Woods, an Elder at St Columba's in Oxford, reflects on Eldership. I reflect on the conciliar decision making process that is used, particularly, in the calling of ministers and CRCWs. Susan Durber, Minister of Taunton URC and Convenor of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Committee, helps us reflect on the sense that we all have multiple vocations. Finally, John Ellis, an Elder and former Moderator of General Assembly, reflects on the universal theme that time, and roles, come to an end.

We hope that these reflections help you focus on your calling - maybe you are exploring a call to join a church, become an Elder or candidate for ministry; maybe

We are not told whether Saul and Barnabas wanted to give up whatever they were doing and be sent off to Cyprus. Evidently the Spirit spoke clearly and they left. If it is our project, it is hard to leave it for someone else to lead and change. If at least some people appreciate our contribution, even more so. Fewer women nowadays have to abandon completely a stimulating career if a baby comes along, but plenty of our ministers had to leave a deeply valued job in order to train for the uncertain, low paid vulnerabilities of stipendiary ministry. When a minister or lay leader feels compelled to move on from a congregation, it does not always feel the perfect time.

Feeling instructed to leave a life I love is even more difficult if what is coming next is unknown. Those around us greet the idea with anxious incomprehension: why are you leaving us? Only later do we see that if we had not been willing to let go and wait, we could never have taken on the next calling that God had in mind. Once experience has taught us that, trusting the Spirit may even become a little easier.

The task in Cyprus proved immensely tough. The next calling is not often an easy reward for good behaviour in the last one. We may wistfully look back on what we agreed to leave behind. Yet in God's Providence we were being equipped. As a hymn that we have forgotten used to say:

Father, I know that all my life
is portioned out for me....
In service which Thy will appoints
there are no bonds for me.

Prayer

God of mystery and surprises
help me to serve gladly where you have called me.
In achievement and in despair, assure me that you have a purpose.
And when the time is right to leave current tasks behind:
speak to me clearly,
give me peace to help me find courage
and teach me that the sun will rise again. Amen

you are already in a role and wonder about how it may develop or if it's time to let it go - and we hope that you pray that all of us discern and follow the callings we have.

Vocations 1 All Called Through Baptism

David Reynolds is a serving Elder at Cores End URC in Buckinghamshire

Galatians 3:23-29

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Reflection

For many years, people have argued about the wearing of school uniform, and one of the most potent arguments in favour is the fact that school uniforms cause all children to appear equal.

Paul begins this chapter of his letter by rebuking the Galatian church, but ends, as so often happens, with some good news - we are now one in Christ Jesus. One of the major causes of this is Baptism, something which hopefully links us all. Even a denomination such as ours, with strands coming from various traditions, contains a dispersed leadership often with confusing titles, but we are all one. We all believe the same thing, and we all are one in Christ. The Sacrament of Baptism has given us a uniform, which despite our differences in background, upbringing, and race, make us equal, not only sharing the joy of that equality, but making us as one with the persecuted Church.

I remember many years ago having access to a dressing up box at school. I found a jumper I liked, and wore it constantly for a few weeks. The fact that it was far too large for me and I kept tripping over didn't matter.

The miracle of our baptism is that Jesus gives us a uniform that is neither too big nor too small. His intention is not to trip us up, nor indeed, to restrict our movement. It is something we should wear with pride, not only among our Christian friends, but among those who aren't yet believers.

Prayer

Father God, help us to wear our uniform with pride. You have made it to fit each and all of us, and as we go about our daily business, teach us to use what we've been given through Baptism for the benefit of our church, and indeed, all people with who we come into contact. Amen.

[Vocations 2 - In the World as we all are](#)

Leo Roberts is the Children and Young People's Officer for the North Western Synod

St Luke 10.1

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.

Reflection

It's odd, isn't it? The Lord didn't appoint seventy rabbis and send them to synagogues. No, he sent 'others' and sent them to every town and place where he himself intended to go. It's almost as though he knew that there were people living their lives, getting on with day-to-day things, that needed ministering to. Of course, He didn't explicitly say DON'T go to the synagogues, and I'm sure that was often their first port of call, but also the workplaces, homes, shops, street corners. He didn't ask His disciples to limit their ministry to designated places of worship, He asked them to go to where people were.

I wonder how those seventy felt as they got to their town or place? Nervous? Excited? Scared? They weren't lone operators, they had someone else on their team but, still...sent out into the world. What was their mission? Was it entirely practical - you know: arrange accommodation, maybe put up a few posters? Or was it about beginning ministry, doing the groundwork, sharing the Gospel?

covenant relationship (like marriage), having a job, volunteering in the community, being an artist – are all things that might be understood as vocations. One person might have several such vocations. The model of the celibate priest is one simple model of vocation, but for most people, vocations are multiple.

In this same Gospel, Joseph of Arimathaea is celebrated as one who 'buries the dead', so perhaps this hard saying in chapter 8 is not urging us to set aside all other vocations in favour of following Jesus, but inviting us to see them all as part of that following. We will have decisions to make about how we follow the restless Jesus. But the decision to live all our roles in the light of his calling to us can't and needn't be put off.

Prayer:

O God, who has honoured me with many calls on my life, and has given me gifts and graces with which to bless the world, may I fulfil every task and love every person as you give me means. May my work and my ministry, my loving and my being, be shaped and blessed by my following of Jesus, and be strengthened by your Holy Spirit, today and always, Amen.

[Vocations 8 Vocation often means letting things go](#)

John Ellis is a past Moderator of the General Assembly and Secretary of Capel United Church in Kent.

Acts 13:1-3

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Reflection

Knowing your vocation sounds very positive; and it is. That confidence enhances the times of celebration and carries you through the barren times. You feel in the right place. However, we hear rather less about what happens when it ends.

O God,
you call all people to yourself,
and are heard in myriad ways,
help us to trust in you as we discern together,
to have confidence that you speak to us through our Councils,
that we discern and test so that your mission to our world is strengthened.
Amen.

Vocations 7 [Being called by many voices](#)

The Rev'd Dr Susan Durber is Minister of Taunton URC.

St Matthew 8: 18 - 22

Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. A scribe then approached and said, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' Another of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'

Reflection:

Jesus doesn't make it easy to follow him. One over enthusiastic scribe offers to go anywhere, any time, but instead of saying 'Great!' Jesus says that it's not that simple, that there is a restlessness about his journey that will stretch the most committed follower. And then when someone else wants to wait before actually setting out, he is told to get on with it and leave everything else behind.

It's not entirely clear what the second of these would-be disciples is saying. Has his father just died? Or is it that he has ageing parents and wants to look after them before committing himself to Jesus? Is Jesus really saying that following him means turning our backs on the responsibilities, even the vocations, that we already have – as those who are in relationships or in jobs that matter to us? Have we really to 'leave everything behind' for the sake of our calling to be disciples?

Many wrestle hard with competing calls on their time and energy. And many of these competing voices can readily be thought of as vocations. Being in a

Did He send out complementary teams? A great preacher with a healer? A fantastic teacher working alongside a miracle worker? A wise old head with an energetic young firebrand?

Or did He just pair folk up randomly and ask them to use whatever skills they had to do the best they could in meeting the needs they found in the places they went to?

It's almost as though Jesus trusted them. Just like He trusts us. To make a positive difference in whatever way they could, in whatever way we can, to people that were there. To people that are here. Wherever that may be. Not just in our churches.

Prayer

Lord, it sometimes feels as though we are the lone voice crying out in the wilderness. We know that you are with us yet sometimes the task, our mission, feels overwhelming.

Help us to feel your presence

Help us to use our gifts

Help us to be strong in our faith

So that the work we do in Your name may help Your kingdom come,
Your will be done. Amen.

Vocations 3 [Call and Servanthood](#)

The Rev'd Ruth Whitehead is currently serving as South Western Synod Moderator.

Isaiah 6: 1-9

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!' And he said, 'Go and say to this people: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand."

Reflection

The call of Isaiah is a favourite of many of those who recognise that they are called by God to service in any capacity. In the context of wonderful, pivot-shaking worship in the Temple, the Lord himself appears and asks 'Who will go for us?'. Often we end our reading with Isaiah's response "Here am I, send me".

The word "I" appears, meaning Isaiah, eight times in this passage and it is easy to be blinded by this personal account into thinking that any call from God is all about 'me'. "Here am I. Send me." It could be all about 'me'.

But in fact the really amazing parts of this account are all about God – his robe, his seraphs, his glory. Only once God has got the attention of Isaiah is he able to cleanse and commission him. And then the work of ministry begins – to go to the people and tell them the message God is giving them. It's a rather odd message, that points to the destruction of the land and the punishment of the people. Only after all that will there be a time of hope. Yet however discouraging at first sight, this is God's message to God's people voiced by God's prophet.

A Methodist colleague of mine is very fond of asking the question, 'For whose benefit is this ministry?' If when we are considering the purpose of our lives we cannot truly answer 'For the service of God and the benefit of God's people' then perhaps we need to read the sixth chapter of Isaiah again – and get past the part which is all about 'me'.

Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.' The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.

Reflection

As a youngster I explored a vocation to be a Catholic priest. My bishop said men in his diocese didn't have a vocation until he said they did! Even though my sense of call has been somewhat refined over the years I felt the bishop understood something - one's sense of call is tested and discerned by the Church. Each denomination does this in various ways - most often through assessment conferences where teams of people look at candidates' written and verbal submissions, psychological profiles, and the way they work with others. This enables a decision to be formed about whether candidates have the potential to be trained for lifelong ministry.

In the URC we test and discern through the Councils of the Church for any type of ordered ministry - the Elders' and Church Meeting will test and discern a sense of Call to be an Elder and those who wish to explore training for ordained or commissioned ministry find their call is further tested through the Synod and through the selection process of General Assembly - the final sense of discernment coming with an initial call to serve a congregation. Sometimes we can criticise ourselves for the length of time our discernment processes take but we have something valuable which is very much embedded in the practice of the early Church.

Paul's successful missionary work amongst gentiles meant they were becoming Christian without first becoming Jewish - challenging the Church's self-definition; was it a Jewish sect or something more? Paul, being something of a loose cannon, pushed ahead with his Gentile mission whilst others were more cautious. There was no established decision making process and so it was decided to hold a Council in Jerusalem to iron out the issues - with the result that the Gentile mission continued.

Conciliar government may be a time consuming and cumbersome process but is a rather better way of discerning together than my old bishop doing it by himself.

check whether the duties the URC Manual assigns to Elders are aligned to either role! But most of the characteristics seem to work well for us.

Having been a serving Elder for the last 18 years, I am struck by the contrasts with leadership roles in my life as a civil servant; there is more listening in being an Elder, for example - listening for God, listening to each other, listening to the wider congregation. Unlike a leadership position at work, being an Elder isn't a promotion, it is simply another form of service. And unlike any promotion exercise I've ever run, potential candidates tend to reflect long and hard before allowing their names to go forward!

Let us pray for those we call to be Elders that they may feel able to accept this call to serve God and their local churches in this ministry.

Prayer:

We give thanks for our Elders;
faithful women and men who answer the call to serve.
May they be kind and constructive in challenge;
concerned and supportive in care; bold and inventive in mission.

We pray that they may know the value of their service,
feel able to lay their responsibilities down at the right time,
and unlock the gifts and service of others,
so that together we may build the Kingdom of God. Amen.

[Vocations 6 Vocation is tested and discerned](#)

The Rev'd Andy Braunston is a minister in the Southside Cluster in Scotland working with Barrhead, Shawlands and Stewarton URCs.

Reading: Acts 15: 1 - 6

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and

Prayer of St Ignatius Loyola:

Dearest Lord,
teach me to be generous;
teach me to serve You as You deserve;
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to ask for reward
save that of knowing I am doing Your Will.
Amen.

[Vocations 4 Called to Leadership](#)

The Revd John Proctor is a member of Downing Place URC, Cambridge, and General Secretary of the URC.

Romans 16:1-2

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Supporting the local church

'Some are called to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments' and some to 'the ministry of church related community work'. So says the URC's Basis of Union (paras 21 and 22). The first of those roles helps the local church to shape its worship, its pastoral life and its outreach. The second role enables congregation and local community to work together for justice and the common good.

Phoebe might have done well in either of those roles. She had a key position in the local church as a 'deacon'. That word suggests both humble service – someone who's not afraid to roll their sleeves up – and also a position of trust and respect.

She appears to have been the carrier of the Letter to the Romans. So she might have been asked to talk about its message with Christians who received it. 'What's Paul getting at? Does he tell other churches about these things? What difference have these ideas made to your life?' I wonder if Phoebe was an off-the-cuff theologian, who could talk with others about God in unrehearsed yet serious and searching ways. That's quite a gift, but we continue to need people who can do it well.

She was generous too, as a 'benefactor'. Phoebe found ways of supporting others, and providing for them, whether with her goods or with her deeds. She may have been one of those early Christians who opened their home for the church to meet, who shared food with those who had too little, who noticed the sick and struggling.

Phoebe could navigate the complex waters of human relationships and leave other people feeling encouraged and helped. She had the confidence of church members at Cenchreae (a port in Greece). She had the nerve to travel and connect with a different set of people in a new place. As she went, she carried a message, to make people think deeply and help them to trust in Jesus. I thank God for Phoebe – and for you, if you do any of these things today.

Prayer

Generous God, help me to be like Phoebe:
open and kind, when others are in need;
practical, when there's a task to be done;
confident, in finding my feet somewhere new;
respectful and helpful, among people of all kinds.

And help me to notice the Phoebes around me,
to honour them, help them and learn from them.

In the name of Jesus Christ the servant King. Amen.

Vocations 5 Called to Elders

Gordon Woods is an Elder of St. Columba's URC, Oxford

1 Timothy 3:1-13

The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way— for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil. Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons. Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be married only once, and let them manage their children and their households well; for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Reflection

In preparing this devotion I refreshed my memory around some of the descriptions in the New Testament about how the early Church was organised. There is plenty about relationships within the community, and about how the early Christians were expected to behave, but relatively little about how it might be led. Peter clearly has a leading role in the opening chapter of Acts, but as the Church grew it must have developed new models of leadership with some being called to lead, not just follow. These verses from 1 Timothy (which probably wasn't written by Paul) set out some of the qualities that such people should have - though, depressingly, the prominent role of women in the Gospels and other parts of the New Testament seems to have been airbrushed out.

These verses refer to Bishops (or 'overseers' in some translations) and Deacons (or 'servants'). Frustratingly, there are no job descriptions attached for us to