

Discerning Call in Others – Ten Top Tips

There is no such thing as an uncalled person. God calls every single baptised Christian to use their gifts in his service. And once we start to discern call in others, then the sky is the limit. Ministry in the local church explodes in all sorts of directions. Laypeople get much better at living out their faith in their daily lives. Everyone grows in their love for God.

Moreover our whole approach to the local church changes. In the church in western Europe we are strangling ourselves with a culture of scarcity. Too often we focus what we haven't got and what we think we need. We mourn a lack of lay leaders, of priests, of teachers, of treasurers, of children's leaders etc. Developing the gift of discernment means that we can focus not on what we haven't got, but on what God has given us. We can delight in our assets rather than mourning our deficiencies. And then we start to find the God who has given us far, far more than ever we could ask or deserve.

But at the same time spotting call can be difficult, especially in those who are different from ourselves. So how can we develop the gift of discernment? Here are ten top tips.

1. **Pray.** An obvious start I know, but an essential one. And the important thing in praying for the gift of discernment is detailed and forensic praying. God wants us to *ask*. So rather than praying in vague terms for people to hear God's call, pray for people by name. Draw up a list and pray for between five and seven members of your congregation *by name* each day. You'll be amazed what happens in their lives in all sorts of unpredictable ways.
2. **Build strong relationships.** It is impossible to discern gifts in others unless you know people well. Some churches carry out long and complicated skills audits in order to work out what God has given them. Personally I have never found these to be of much use. Nothing can replace good, old-fashioned pastoral ministry. Just get to know the people God has given you, love them, cherish them, listen to them. Over time you will begin to discern their gifts and comprehend something of God's plan for them.
3. **Have a compelling vision of church life.** Who wants to volunteer for a dull, visionless Church? Who wants to offer their time, talents or money to a church that is heading nowhere, has no sense of its future and has been gripped by a mentality of decline? People will want to play their part when they see a Church which has an outward-focussed vision of what it is for and how it is called to serve. There are many ways of developing and promoting such a vision (Mission Action Planning, Leading your Church into Growth etc.) But when people are excited by a sense of direction, they will want to get on board. And almost any church, no matter how small, can have a positive vision of its future.
4. **Take faith formation seriously.** Discipleship. Growing in holiness. Sanctification. Call it what you like! But every church needs to be asking itself how it is helping people to take the next step on the journey of faith. It is extraordinary how often vocations emerge from opportunities that people have been given to learn about their faith through courses, nurture groups, retreats, pilgrimages, sermon series, small groups etc. Again any church, no matter how small, can develop a plan to grow the faith of its members.

5. **Don't control. Release.** This is a tricky one! How do you understand your leadership style? Many people see leadership as fundamentally about control. They are the ones in charge who must make the decisions, set direction and direct staff and volunteers. It's a very easy and reassuring style to adopt, both for the leader and for the led. The trouble is it suppresses gifts and limits growth. We need to learn a leadership style that is not about control, but about release. The best leaders are constantly forming new leaders, giving power away, setting people free and creating the spaces in which others can flourish. They will share a characteristic of delighting in nothing more than seeing people released into service.
6. **Have a brazen nerve.** All too often we are frightened to approach people about taking on a new task or exercising a new ministry. We assume people are too busy, under-committed or over-stretched. But actually people love to serve, and even if they cannot accept an invitation, they are usually delighted to be invited. So set aside inhibitions and make the approach.
7. **Don't ask, call.** The way in which we ask is vital. Here are two ways of inviting someone to share in youth work. "Sharon, we are desperate for a youth leader! I've asked so many people. Would there be any chance of you doing it, just for a few weeks, as a massive favour?" That kind of language is very easy to fall into. But it sets up a wrong dynamic from the start in which you are in the debt of the person you are asking. They are doing you a favour rather than serving Christ, so the moment they have had enough they will hand the task back to you. A much better script is this. "Sharon, I think Lord has given you some gifts for youth ministry. Might he be asking you to use them in this way?" Ministry is not asking people to do your favours. It is about calling people to use their gifts in Christ's service.
8. **Take small steps.** We need to plot journeys over time to enable people to grow in confidence. Their service might start with something very simple like making the coffee or running a table at Messy Church. But then in stages the challenge level can grow. Writing intercessions. Co-leading a group. Serving on the PCC. And as confidence increases, people will find more and more delight in serving so that what starts with the coffee rota ends up with them in House of Lords! Let people discern call over time and try out different ways of serving.
9. **Encourage, encourage, encourage.** When people are trying something out for the first time, criticism never helps. And in any case when people have made a mistake, they very rarely need it pointing out. Just encourage and praise. Take real delight in what they have done.
10. **Relish catastrophe.** Churches that are seeking to build a culture of vocation will never be perfect. And in any case the search for perfection, especially in worship, is heresy. It is God alone who renders perfect our weak and frail efforts to praise him. Churches that are taking risks with people will take a strange delight in things going wrong. Of course they will learn and seek to improve, but at the same time they will know that stretching people and drawing out gifts involves risks.

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