**5 Steps of Discernment**

This brief guide is designed to support you in your process of discerning a call into vocational ministry. The general principles can be applied in other situations, but the specific reflections and questions are those to guide through this specific situation.

InterVarsity Link sends Americans to serve cross-culturally with movements of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). Discernment conversations are the center of what we do on a regular basis with students approaching graduation, current InterVarsity staff, or people seeking a career change. These steps are applicable to people in any stage or at any age of life.

We believe the Lord calls. That calling may be specific or general, it may be clear or unfold over time, it may be comforting or disturbing. For followers of Christ, whatever the calling and however it comes, it must be heeded. These 5 steps give a framework for moving from the calling to specific place of ministry or vocational change.

Although we call them steps, there is a certain fluidity about them. They are not to be followed like a recipe but recognized and allowed to unfold. For example, steps 2 and 3 (“Testing” and “Confirmation from Others”) often overlap each other. As we explore our calling and try new things, confirmation from those around us is one important means of evaluating and moving forward.

Therefore, we invite you into these steps and pray they will give you language and vision for the process that the Lord is walking you through. We also pray that the reflection questions will give you the space needed to hear from Him and step faithfully into that “next thing” that He has prepared for you.

**Step 1: Hearing the Call**

Calling to ministry, in general, can be very subtle. You may be good at certain things and, over time, step into opportunities that both “feel” right and are successful. However, you may also clearly remember a time you heard a call to cross-cultural missions. Where were you, what did you hear and see, and what did you immediately do.

Both of those situations are normal. In a general sense, you may not have called it a call until much later – until you had met success and moved forward into a regular practice of ministry. In a more specific event, you may have shot out of your seat once hearing a challenge to respond and went right out to find someone to send you overseas.

At the first step of exploring and discerning your calling, think back over your life and look for the calling you have received. There may be multiple calling moments or one capital “C” calling moment. Use whichever column below fits your experience best.

My Calling Reflection:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| General Calling Experience: | Capital “C” Calling Experience: |
| How has God been calling you? | What specific calling experience have you had? |
| How often have you heard his calling? | What did you see or hear? |
| How did that calling mesh with your gifts and hopes? | Was there a specific Scripture that he used? |
| What impact did it have on you then? Now? | What impact did it have on you then? Now? |

**Step 2: Testing the Call**

What we do with that call is an important part of our discipleship. No calling from the Lord of our life can pass by unaccepted and unheeded. We must step into it. However, because our life with Christ is often likened to a journey or a walk, the path from hearing a call to its completion is rarely direct. There are many stopping points and occasional detours along the way.

How have you pressed into the calling you have received? How have you tested that calling? All messages from God can and should be tested. The following reflection questions help us consider how we have put feet to the call we received.

Testing the Call:

1. What new things did you try to understand what you heard?
2. What impact did those efforts have on you? On Others?
3. What worked well? What didn’t work well?
4. What did you learn about yourself during this time?

**Step 3: Confirmation from Others**

The calling you have received is not for you. It is part of a much bigger plan. As Paul writes to the Corinthians after his long discussion about the Spirit and spiritual gifts:

“Everything must be done so the church may be built up.” (1 Cor. 14:26b)

Your calling is the specific way you are being set apart for building up the Church – the bride of Christ in the world.

One significant element of discerning our calling is the input and confirmation of others in the body. Those who receive our ministry, those who minister alongside of us, and those who lead us into ministry should be primary sources in the confirmation of our calling.

This is not about success or failure, but rather about recognizing the presence of the Lord in our attempts.

Confirming our Calling:

1. As you have shared about your calling with family and friends, what responses have you received? Any strikingly positive ones? Any negative ones?
2. Of the people you have led in ministry, who has confirmed this calling in your life?
3. Of your mentors or leaders, who has confirmed this calling in your life?
4. Where have you hoped for more confirmation than you have received?

**Step 4: Sorting through Opportunities and Timing**

Typically, a calling from God does not, unfortunately, come with very clear and specific instructions. Discerning our calling is much more of an art than a science. Those who have gone through the process multiple times rarely feel more prepared for the next time – except for faith and patience to let the process run.

There are many good opportunities that will present themselves for your consideration. The questions arise – which are the good, better, and best choices to make? Some wise leaders I have known have even questioned whether there is a “best” – or at least a “best” we can know before we step into it.

Therefore, during this time of sifting and sorting through many good opportunities, we need to listen to the Lord, others, and ourselves. Key elements of this step are a growing self-awareness and an openness to whatever God sends your way. The self-awareness is key to help us visualize ourselves doing something new. The openness is key because God knows us better than we know ourselves.

Sorting through Opportunities and Timing:

1. What resources or relationships do you have to help you learn about and sort through possible opportunities?
2. What are the opportunities available to you which resonate with your call, experiences, gifts, desires, and/or current plans?
3. When might be the best time to pursue specific opportunities?
4. Are there specific opportunities to pursue sooner which would help you discern whether you should pursue a more challenging opportunity later?

5. What resources, including other people, do you have to help you discern and make decisions?

**Step 5: Stepping into the Process**

When you have a shorter list of opportunities that feel like they fit well with your calling as you know it, it is time to step into the process. Most vocational ministry opportunities want their application process to be a discipleship process for the applicants. Some offer internship or volunteer options at the beginning to give further opportunities to listen and reflect.

Choose one or two opportunities and allow the Lord to speak to you through them. You may grow in self-awareness and understanding through the questions in the application, the responses from your references, and the questions in the interview. There is no failure here. This process is always to further hear from the Lord and to find a good place for you to use your gifts, experiences, and skills.

How do you choose? The Bible shows everything from direct words from heaven to people casting lots. Pray for discernment, ask for a sense of peace, and take a step – trusting that the Lord wants you to find a good place as much as you do.

Stepping into the Process:

1. Is there one or a few different opportunities that you could pursue now? In the coming months?
2. What might you need in order to do this?
3. What might your specific next steps be?
4. Is there anything stopping you from moving ahead? Fear? Anxiety? Lies?
5. Who can accompany you as you step into the process and pursue this opportunity?

**Moving forward with the Lord**

As you continue forward in your own discernment journey, remember that that Lord is both the start and the finish. The author of the letter to the Hebrews calls him the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (12:2). I like to imagine him as the one who plants the seed and reaps the harvest, the one who designs the new monument and who cuts the ribbon, the one who packs our bags and welcomes us at our destination with a hot meal.

Therefore, as you continue this journey, “fix your eyes on Jesus.” He has called you, he is walking alongside you, and he is waiting for you at the end. We have no better companion and support in this process.

He will respond to our prayers and requests for help. He will often – as I pointed out in step 3 – use other people to give us what we need at different stages. Pastors, teachers, family, and friends are all great sources. Leaders, peers, and those you serve in ministry are also sources of encouragement and clarity.

If you journey continues towards cross-cultural student ministry, the staff coordinators at InterVarsity Link would love to support you. If you have already connected with one of us, feel free to reach out to them again. If not, our website has a short contact form that you can complete, and one of us will contact you shortly.

We praise God for your interest and your openness to him. May you find that place that fills you with joy as you extend Christ’s love to those around you.

InterVarsity Link

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