

Call to the Ministry – Ross Cartwright

From childhood I attended Baptist churches in Reading and then Braintree and made a profession of faith when I was 25. In my teens I had stopped attending church but then through an injury I realised that my life had taken the wrong direction and that it was time to return to the Lord. I was baptised in Braintree Baptist Church.

Before Rachael and I met we were both actively involved in Church life. Rachael's father is a minister so throughout her life she was used to church activity. Rachael took a gap year to serve with YWAM in their 'Year for God' programme in Bolivia. I was involved with youth work in my local church.

When Rachael and I met and got to know each other, one of the things that we found we had in common was a love for the Gospel and the church. We both talked of a real desire to serve God in our lives in a meaningful way. As I engaged in youth work within the church and with a local youth club I found it an amazing privilege to present Christ in the Gospel to young people and to assist the young people to grow and develop in their faith.

After Rachael and I got married we began to think and pray a lot about the future and what God had planned for us. Being involved in youth work gave me a great sense of purpose as I felt I was completing God's purpose for me. It was laid upon our hearts to explore fulltime youth work. We began to push at doors to see what would open for us. I was offered a youth worker's post in the Swindon area working as a Christian Youth Worker in an ecumenical partnership. However this would involve a major step of faith as taking the job meant Rachael leaving her job without any guarantee of finding another, it meant moving away from the youth work, the young people that I had come to know and love, moving away from the local church that had been my spiritual birthplace and moving away from our families. Yet we believed that this was the step that God would have us take and we entrusted ourselves into His hands.

It was a two year contract and as part of it I attended a Ministry Training Course, the studying and the job brought me closer to God, increased my knowledge and understanding and opened up possibilities for the future. The ministry training course awakened in me a spiritual depth. This challenged me to think about what was next. At the beginning of the second year of my contract I was asked to make the decision as to whether to extend the contract or finish. Again we were faced with a decision that would require another step of faith. I learned so much during those two years. While the job was mainly youth work there were a number of opportunities to preach. My home church in Braintree also provided opportunities to preach. Theological study and the experience of preaching caused me to enquire of God if ministry was the way that He was leading. At an early stage I invited an experienced minister to come to listen to me preaching and to give advice not just on preaching technique and content but to help me explore if it was advisable to continue exploring ministry as a possibility. We met up a couple of weeks afterwards and I received encouragement that I had a gift that could be developed.

Two major things were happening in my life, I had a growing desire to explore pastoral ministry and for the first time in my life I had exposure to two different denominations which made me reflect about the different theological traditions and my sense of belonging to which tradition. Happily I

had gone to my local Baptist Church growing up but that was because that was where my family went, but now having undertaken some theological study and experienced other church life I felt the need to establish what my own theological convictions were. The type of church that I believed was biblical was one that placed the preaching of God's word in a place of importance, that saw the importance of the local church, that was committed to believers' baptism and one that was committed to evangelism. While I enjoyed my time and fellowship working in other denominations and though I still have a heart to help other churches I realised that my convictions were baptistic and that if I were to explore ministry it would have to be ministry in a Baptist church.

During my two year contract, while the nature of my role involved working in the church most Sundays, we felt it important to attach ourselves to a local Baptist Church. This brought us to Gorse Hill. We joined a home group and attended Sunday services every Sunday I was free.

We began exploring with Steve the possibility of going into Baptist ministry. He encouraged us to keep exploring and set us up with a meeting with the regional minister. He advised us of the different Baptist Colleges in the area and suggested we visit them before applying.

After visiting all the colleges we had the real sense that God was leading me to Spurgeon's College. This was not what we felt we wanted as logistically, it was the furthest away and would involve a lot of travelling. But we knew it was what God wanted. This was confirmed with the application onto the ministerial course being accepted. During this time I was also taking opportunities to preach under the leadership of Reverend Ian Tweedie-Smith.

The call so far has been a journey. It has been a time of great challenge in our lives as Rachael underwent surgery twice, with the operation to remove her appendix being almost too late it left Rachael very ill. The decision to go to Bible College was not taken lightly as again we found ourselves having to take a step of faith which resulted in a period of unemployment for me. I found this challenging as it placed both Rachael and myself under some pressure. Nevertheless we were happy to place ourselves under God's care because we believed we were by faith following in a path of obedience to God's will. I started studying part time at Spurgeon's Baptist College as we felt this is where God was leading me. I later secured a part time job in Wantage working Thursday, Friday and Saturday. This has definitely been a lifestyle change, and a change to the dynamic of a working week and to family life. We faced a further challenge when the church said no to having a placement student in the Jan 2016 meeting. This was deeply disappointing and caused us to turn to God to seek His grace to deal with this unexpected providence. This was a real challenge to our sense of calling but we resolved to submit ourselves to God and His timing. This could have caused us to doubt our calling and lead to us giving up, but the reverse has been the outcome. We believe that the challenge has helped us to confirm our conviction that this is the way that God wants us to go. We have learned that when God calls you to a task that He equips you for that task, spiritually, emotionally and physically. In dealing with disappointment we have learned the importance of committing our lives into God's hand and completely trusting Him for the future.

The time of study at Spurgeons has helped me mature as a Christian and has created a greater appetite to study God's word and to theologically prepare myself for future ministry. While this study and preparation has an eye to the future I also believe that it is important that I serve the church now. I have endeavoured where possible to seize every opportunity to serve in church to the best of my ability, to test my character and to develop the skills and gifts that will help people in the church now and prepare myself in practical ways to serve in the future. I am keen to develop a

teachable spirit, to learn from those older in the faith and seek to change and grow as God gives me grace.

I work hard at listening and relating to other people. I try to reflect on what is important when relating with people of different age or background. I try to observe and learn from others who do this well. I have opportunity to pursue this development through my involvement at Luncheon Club, in church services and in my current workplace – being a receptionist in a nursing home there is ample opportunity for me to be an encourager and be a positive influence to others.

I have sought to acquire the skills and experience of preaching, teaching and leading which I have been able to develop through opportunities at Gorse Hill Baptist, as well as St Mary's in Purton and Braintree Baptist Church. I have had feedback from these opportunities, both general and specific. The criticism has been constructive and has aided my development. After my first time preaching I was given feedback from the minister as part of this testing.

This call is something that we have and do test in many forms, with God. Through prayer and talking together with Rachael, we have discussed not just whether it is the right thing that God wants us to do, but also the theological idea: why we do what we do, why we believe what we do and what difference that actually makes to us.

I test the call through speaking to other church members, deacons and other church leaders, many of whom note the passion and gifting and encourage me to pursue it.

The guidelines that I have sought to follow as I have wrestled with this sense of calling in prayer before the Lord are:

- The Scriptures that have been important to us specifically as we think of the sense of call are 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1 informing us of the qualifications required for the ministry. Isaiah 40:31 has constantly encouraged us to hope in the Lord.
- In 1 Tim 3 it speaks of setting your heart on the task and desiring a noble thing. I believe that my heart has been set for me on this role by God. My desire to serve God and the church in ministry is a desire that has grown stronger and been strengthened through challenges and trials.
- I feel humbled by the prospect of God wanting to use me in this role.
- I have sought the honest advice of colleagues and friends to test whether others believe that there is a sense of calling.
- I endeavour to study and prepare myself and develop the skills and experience that I need for the future
- I believe that if we continue to commit ourselves to God in prayer that in His time the appropriate door will open to make service possible.