

**Lott Carey Calling Congregations:
Noticing, Naming, and Nurturing Young People
with an Inclination toward Vocational Ministry**
(In partnership with The Fund for Theological Education)

What are Lott Carey Calling Congregations?	Page 1
What might a Calling Congregation look like?	Page 1
Assessment of Characteristics of a Calling Congregation	Page 3
Questions that Calling Congregations May Want to Ask	Page 4
Book Review of <i>The Good Teen</i>, A Learning Resource	Page 5
Lessons We Are Learning	Page 6

Lott Carey Calling Congregations Project

We are sharing this work in process of five churches in our Calling Congregations Cluster with the hope that other churches will join the journey. Let us hear from you!

What are Lott Carey Calling Congregations?

The Lott Carey Calling Congregations Project is enabling five congregations to develop practices that both welcome and encourage adolescents to consider the call to ministry as a viable vocational possibility for their lives. The call to vocational ministry is a noble call, and churches should be safe and inviting places for youth to “try on the mantle of ministry”. Further churches should seek intentionally to develop the capacity to discern when youth may have “an inclination toward ministry” and to nurture that inclination.

Our cluster of churches is helping each another to develop practices to help them “notice, name, and nurture” young people who may have an inclination toward vocational ministry and to create a community of youth from the cluster churches who can collaborate in ministry learning and leadership activities. We are not imposing practices, but exploring the development of practices appropriate each congregation’s contexts. Additionally, the participating youth will exercise ministry leadership planning and implementation in their congregations and in Lott Carey’s International Youth Development Department. This will give them experience at congregational levels and beyond.

What might a Calling Congregation look like?

The group of pastors who serve the churches in this project have imagined some of helpful characteristics that Calling Congregations might have. While these characteristics are not exhaustive, we think they are helpful to consider.

Lott Carey Calling Congregations are seeking to strengthen their work in up to six of the following 12 characteristics. We believe our Calling Congregations should:

- (1) Have adults who can discern God’s call on the lives of young people;
- (2) Have pastoral leadership that invests time and energy in mentoring prospective protégés;
- (3) Facilitate finding mentors for their charges when others can better nurture their gifts in particular areas or due to relocation on the part of the pastor or the protégé;
- (4) Make opportunities for youth to practice leadership in various aspects of ministry;
- (5) Enable intentional invitation to, and sometimes recruitment for, the exercising and developing of gifts;
- (6) Do not shrink before competing voices for vocations that call for the energy and engagement of young minds, hearts, and bodies;
- (7) Find creative ways to enable young people who may feel inclinations toward ministry to “test the waters”;
- (8) Enable young people to explore vocational ministry options;
- (9) Encourage people to seek fulfillment in vocational choices rather than prioritizing high income generating careers;
- (10) Affirm the mystery of call;
- (11) Affirm the dignity of call—to the Christian life generally and to vocational ministry particularly; and
- (12) Invest resources in the cultivation of youth in service, learning, and leadership development.

Each congregation in our cluster has evaluated their success in the above areas and has identifies specific characteristics to strengthen. They used the following tool.

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Assessment of Characteristics of a Calling Congregation

Rate how well your congregation demonstrates the following characteristics on a scale of 1 to 5.

- 1 – poor
- 2 – fair
- 3 – so, so
- 4 – good
- 5 – very good

Characteristic	Rating
1. Have adults who can discern God’s call on the lives of young people;	
2. Have pastoral leadership that invests time and energy in mentoring prospective protégés;	
3. Facilitate finding mentors for their charges when others can better nurture their gifts in particular areas or due to relocation on the part of the pastor or the protégé;	
4. Make opportunities for youth to practice leadership in various aspects of ministry;	
5. Enable intentional invitation to, and sometimes recruitment for, the exercising and developing of gifts;	
6. Do not shrink before competing voices for vocations that call for the energy and engagement of young minds, hearts, and bodies;	
7. Find creative ways to enable young people who may feel inclinations toward ministry to “test the waters”;	
8. Enable young people to explore vocational ministry options;	
9. Encourage people to seek fulfillment in vocational choices rather than prioritizing high income generating careers;	
10. Affirm the mystery of call;	
11. Affirm the dignity of call—to the Christian life generally and to vocational ministry particularly; and	
12. Invest resources in the cultivation of youth in service, learning, and leadership development.	

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Questions that Calling Congregations May Want to Ask

Additionally, the cluster leaders have identified some important questions. Churches that work to develop practices that welcome and encourage adolescents to consider the call to ministry as a viable vocational possibility for their lives may do well to consider the following questions.

1. How do we know when a young person has an inclination toward ministry? What does that inclination look like? Churches may need a word of caution about privileging a “celebrity” style inclination toward ministry. Viable vocational ministry is not always public, performance, or center-staged. Essential ministry gifts also include gifts of encouragement, administration, etc. Churches need to avoid recognizing only the best and brightest and the most outgoing and outstanding as people who may have an inclination toward ministry.
2. What roles can families of origins or households in which adolescents live play in “noticing, naming, and nurturing” young people who may have an inclination toward ministry?
3. How can churches affirm adolescents who may have an inclination toward vocational ministry when they do not live in families that can affirm this call—either because of the lack of capacity or of visions of different vocational options?
4. What kinds of leaders are best suited to advance the foci of Calling Congregations? What kinds of leaders are most useful to facilitate noticing, naming, and nurturing in trying on the mantle of ministry?
5. How might Calling Congregations enrich their language when talking about “ministry”? The term has different connotations in different contexts. Sometimes “ministry” means preaching or music. Some have sought to level the language of ministry by saying “every disciple is called to ministry.” If this is so, how do Calling Congregations construct meaningful language about ministry as vocation?
6. What kind of activities can churches use to give opportunities for adolescents to demonstrate authentically gifts that are observable to Calling Congregations rather than mere imitations of traditional roles modeled by adults?
7. How might we secure congregational ownership to become Calling Congregations as opposed to congregational permission for a youth department to do this work compartmentally?
8. How do we help adults adjust to, affirm, and welcome the creativity and originality of youth as we give more opportunities for leadership and participation (e.g., clothing styles, worship styles, youth oriented language, etc.)?

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A Resource for Calling Congregations to Consider

Richard M. Lerner, Ph.D. *The Good Teen: Rescuing Adolescence from the Myths of the Storm and Stress Years*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007.

Reviewed by Dr. David Emmanuel Goatley (October 2008)

The Good Teen by Richard M. Lerner, Ph.D. encourages parents and other adults to view adolescents through the lens of positive development which sees teens as “assets in the making, rather than problems waiting to happen.” He challenges opinion held by some that teenage years are inevitably tumultuous. He concludes from his research that teens can be nurtured to contribute positively to home, community, nation, and world.

Lerner builds his case on three decades as an applied development scientist where he has used the “strength based theory of human development” of Positive Development. He describes five (5) characteristics of teen behavior proven to advance positive development – Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring. He also gives insightful examples of how parents can foster the 5Cs.

The Good Teen convincingly argues that teens can “become” effectively functioning people who are good for the world. It explains how teens possess “plasticity.” They have the capacity to change, grow, learn, and mature. Lerner’s work grows from Tufts University’s Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development and the National 4-H Council funded 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development, both which he directs. His findings result in a readable and useful guide that can help parents raise teens to be good people. The real life examples model constructive behavior for parents that initiate positive development or that responds to challenges in ways that can yield positive outcomes. The book concludes with chapters that help parents to deal with teens that exhibit real troubled behavior, and it calls for communities to move toward developing policies and practices that nurture positive development for youth.

Lerner makes the case that we do have and can have good teens—people that make positive contributions to their world. Good teens can be developed when parents provide teens sustained positive interaction with adults, when they enable teens participate in activities that help them develop life skills, and when they give teens opportunities to become leaders of valued community activities. These he calls the Big 3. When this happens, parents can better achieve the goal “to raise teens who are healthy and self-reliant and who become productive adults who can assume leadership roles in their lives and in their community and the world at large.”

The Good Teen is instructive for more than parents. All who work with adolescents can benefit from the insight and encouragement Lerner provides. Growing numbers of teenagers enjoy decreasing time with families. School schedules, extra-curricular activities, parental work loads, technology entertainment, and the desire to socialize with peers precipitate the need for adolescents to have broad communities of adults who can contribute to their nurture in beneficial ways. *The Good Teen* has particular application for those who work with youth in churches. Rather than excessive attention to activities that can keep youth busy along with arbitrarily chosen Bible lessons thrown in for good measure, what might be the outcome of youth ministries organizing learning, sharing, and growing activities around the 5Cs? If congregations implemented programs to advance Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring in adolescents, they may discover that they can become places that help call out new generations of leaders for the church and the world.

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Lessons That We Are Learning

Thinking intentionally about practices that help churches notice, name, and nurture young people who may have an inclination toward vocational ministry is both challenging and exciting for the Lott Carey Calling Congregation Cluster. Our Cluster is comprised of five African American Baptist churches the Metropolitan Washington, DC area who are trying to explore habits and practices that can improve our capacities in this area. Three are in urban areas of Washington and Northern Virginia. One is just outside Washington. One is in the Northern Virginia suburbs.

Challenging Work

The challenging aspect of this project relates to the newness of the concept for churches. Most churches with whom we are familiar respond to a young person who expresses that she may be, or that she has been, “called” to ministry. This call to ministry is usually interpreted to mean pursuing a preaching ministry in the life of the church. Precisely how churches respond differs, but they generally begin a journey toward preparing the “called one” for preaching an initial sermon. This journey can last a few weeks to several months. Essentially, however, churches wait for a young person to take the initiative.

Beyond beginning a journey toward preparing for a preaching ministry, the church tries to find an area for the new minister to exercise and develop leadership gifts. This practice of ministry arena might be among youth, in visitation, in teaching, and the like. What develops is something akin to an informal on-the-job training program or apprenticeship. Little attention, however, is given to formal assessments of spiritual gifts, skill sets, etc. The placement process generally is more intuitive or reliant upon the self-selection of the minister-in-training. Consequently, since our churches did not have formulated strategies or programs to implement, they had to build this work anew. Not having models to follow that had been developed in contexts similar to our Cluster’s contexts make the work challenging. Building from scratch can be hard work.

Exciting Work

The same thing that makes this project challenging, however, is also what makes it exciting. Thinking creatively and imaginatively about how churches can better create space that is inviting and safe for young people to explore ministry as possible vocation is exciting. Being intentional about this project has invited pastors, adult leaders, and youth to engage together in ways that they have not normally done. Some of our pastors have grown in unexpected ways through the tutelage of their youth congregants. Sometimes that get laughed at, but mostly they are enjoying growing bonds of community, insight, and rapport.

Pastors in our cluster who are investing in time and conversation with their youth are learning a lot. They are seeking to listen and ask questions so that they can learn more about the lives and insights of their youth. In this sense, the roles of mentoring are reversing. Youth are mentoring their pastors and enabling their pastors to view life from different perspectives and through different lenses. The pastors, although sometimes made uncomfortable, are learning and enjoying and growing. The youth who are enjoying quality and quantity time with their pastors are taking seriously their role as

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mentors and teachers, and the relationships are maturing in ways that are important today and that will become more important in days to come.

Push-Back

One unanticipated area of push-back came from some parents who were concerned that the church's intentionality was an effort to their children into preaching or to a path that was leading to pastoral ministry. While the program is designed to help young people to begin a process of vocational discernment that MAY lead toward ministry as vocation, this is not a recruiting program. Still, some parents were uneasy about the idea of their children taking a path toward ministry vocation.

This uneasiness invites interesting questions. Why, for example, would parents not want their children to pursue ministry as vocation? One of the bizarre habits of some congregants is that we encourage our best and brightest young people to pursue careers in everything except vocational ministry. Be a lawyer. Be a doctor. Be an engineer. Be an entrepreneur. Be an actor. Be an athlete. Why do Christian parental dreams for their children's future usually ignore a life of full-time vocational ministry? Why do Christians so often encourage our most promising young people to explore careers outside the church rather than inside the church? This habit risks "dumbing down" the pool of gifted future leaders for the church. Who else does that but the church???

Another push-back moment we experience is that the time it takes to engage intentionally around conversations and activities that help young people have experiences that can lead them to begin to think about ministry as vocation relates to competition for time. Negotiating time in the calendars of adolescents is a formidable task. School, drama, dance, music, athletics, computer games, and "chillin'" with friends does not give much time for young people to participate in activities imagined for this project. Consequently, we found some parents interpreting the Calling Congregations Project as being competitive rather than complimentary. This competition is further seen when commuting is part of the equation. None of the churches in our cluster are "neighborhood churches" in the sense that the majority of their congregants live within a three to five mile radius. Metropolitan Washington, DC is a commuter culture. It is not uncommon for people to have significant parts of their lives occur in DC and Maryland, and Virginia. Many urban congregants now live in suburbia. Juggling work and school and activities and travel create major tensions for time together. We are not convinced that technology can displace physical time together, but we are convinced that personal and technological interactions can be complimentary. Negotiating balance is an ongoing practice.

However, discernment requires conversation and relationship building, and both of these take time to do. Leaders in this project have sought to explain to parents that our vision of discipleship is holistic. We do not believe that some of life should be sacred and other parts should be secular. We understand discipleship to be an organizing principle for all of life. This area of resistance had given opportunity for us to emphasize the place of discernment in seeking to explore life vocation for young people and adults. Here we can emphasize the equal importance of journey and destination.

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Institutional Challenges

Irrespective of how much we talk about church as community and church as organism, church is also institution. Church cannot only be a cloud moving wherever the Spirit blows. Church is also a box with form and structure. Consequently, the ways that many churches organize their lives together often create departments and segmentation that can be tough to navigate. When we separate youth ministry activities from adult ministry activities, how does the church enable young people to exercise leadership outside of the youth department or youth church or youth ministry? How do we enable young leaders who may have an inclination toward ministry as vocation to practice in both/and contexts rather than either/or communities? Dealing effectively with this question demands confronting (although not contentiously or violently) cultures that develop in church life, and cultural practices have deep and tangled roots. Handling creatively cultural tensions are especially challenging in congregations that are old or congregations that have many older members.

The rhythms of church can also challenge effectively engaging youth for exploring vocational ministry as an option. Some churches have rather fixed calendars and routines and habits. Some of these deeply rooted practices may have good logic for their origination, but how do people determine the rationale for their continuation? The variety of programs and activities that place demands of people's time and energy and resources can unintentionally resist congregational efforts to create time and space and resource to invest in helping young people discern vocation. The business and crowdedness of church calendars and commitments may choke out investments in facilitating journeys of discernment for young people who normally do not have voice and vote and volume of financial contribution to be heard. Do the rhythms of a church's life together give time for young people to breathe, to inhale the breadth of the Spirit? Do our church rhythms make room for young people to hear from God?

Some Emerging Theological Ideas

1. Faithful living is an organizing principle for life. Living faithfully as a disciple of Jesus requires holistic integration in the multiple communities, activities, relationships, and time commitments in the lives of youth (and adults).
2. Faith development is a journey of discernment. Journeys require time and commitment. Journeys bring celebration and frustration. Encouraging and facilitating discernment should be a priority ministry of the church.
3. Journey is equally as important as destination. Discovering what God may be calling one to as well as what God is not calling one to are equally important aspects of the journey. The journey gives the destination meaning, and the destination gives the journey meaning.
4. Noticing, naming, and nurturing young people who may pursue ministry as vocation is a spiritual discipline for a church. Just as worship and service and study of scripture are integral to the life of the church, so is intentionally seeking to discover and develop young people who may have an inclination toward ministry as vocation. If for those who are not called to vocational ministry, the journey will enable a growing maturity in the life of believers.