ABSTRACT

COLLINS, JOSEPH WESLEY. Calling: A Phenomenological Study. (Under the direction of John M. Pettitt.)

The research describes the phenomenon of calling from the perspectives of lay adult Sunday School teachers. Using a phenomenological approach involving in-depth interviews, the study focuses on the experiences of ten teachers from Southern Baptist churches in western North Carolina. Collectively, these participants have approximately 202 years of teaching experience in adult Sunday School. They range in age from thirty-seven to eighty-three and include five men and five women. Nine are Caucasian; one is Afro-American.

Ontologically, the conceptual framework of this study is interpretivistic. Epistemologically, it assumes that the knower and the known are essential elements that collide and create the phenomenon under investigation. The object of research is the perception of the participants concerning calling. It is not the purpose of the research to define or prove the existence of calling, but to describe admittedly subjective perspectives of it. These collective descriptions serve to construct a social meaning of the phenomenon.

Using phenomenological methodology, the study recognizes six horizons, or essences, of the phenomenon of calling. Three are related to the participants’ perceptions of an entity working outside themselves who communicates with them. These are labeled “direct communication,” “communication via others,” and “divinely orchestrated circumstances.” The other three are related to self-awareness and include “burden over needs of others,” “gifts/talents,” and “personal needs, interests, and desires.”
The study raises more questions than it answers about calling, and all recommendations are aimed at further research. In the area of motivational theory, it points out a blurring of the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Further investigation of this blurring is recommended in order to understand religious motivation. The study also provides a basis for further research and development of recruiting models and instruments for use in adult Christian education. Because the study focuses on a very narrow population, transferability of the proposed description of calling is impossible without further studies with other religious and non-religious groups. Such studies are also needed to investigate the effect of organization and practice on a group’s perception of calling.
CALLING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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APPROVED BY:

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   Chair of Advisory Committee
PERSONAL BIOGRAPHY

Joseph Wesley Collins was born in Fort Benning, Georgia on March 20, 1956 to Sergeant Parks A. Collins and his wife Aldia. After his father retired from the military in 1965, Joseph began attending Troutman Baptist Church in Troutman, North Carolina, where he committed himself to Christianity. It was in Troutman that he had his first experiences with teaching in the church when he was given the opportunity to lead Sunday School classes and Royal Ambassador meetings of his peers. As a three-time state wrestling champion at South Iredell High School, he also had many opportunities to coach fellow teammates. The joy he experienced in teaching continued to influence his educational and professional choices.

As a student at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, he became a member of Immanuel Baptist Church where he eventually taught youth Sunday School, Royal Ambassadors, and Training Union. His professional plans were to pursue a career in teaching English while he continued to teach in a volunteer capacity in church. However, after receiving a Masters degree in English, he began to sense a calling to go to seminary and study to become a professional Christian educator.

Most of Joseph’s professional career has been in the area of Christian Education. As a Minister of Education, Director of Church Development, Associational Sunday School Director, and North Carolina Baptist State Convention Adult Specialist, his greatest joy has always been in teaching. To help others discover the joy of a calling to teach became a driving force of his ministry.

However, Joseph was disappointed in the tools and resources available to him as an educator to help others discover their calling. Therefore, he began searching for further
education to help him develop such resources. In 1999, he enrolled in the Adult and Community College Education doctoral program at North Carolina State University in order to develop research skills and techniques to continue his quest in adult Christian education. The journey has been beneficial in many ways to both Joseph and the churches he serves. Although much research lies ahead, the following dissertation is a first step in accomplishing some of his professional and spiritual goals.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without the support of my dear wife Pam, neither this dissertation nor any part of the doctoral program would have been possible. I thank her from the bottom of my heart for the many hours she gave me to travel, write, and study. I thank her for keeping me up with the latest and greatest in computer technology. I thank her for transcribing all of the interviews just for sheer love of me. I am humbled by her sacrifice for me to pursue my professional and educational goals.

I also want to thank my advisory committee for their suggestions and their willingness to work with me over the last couple of years. Barbara Sparks introduced me to qualitative research in general and to phenomenology specifically. It was in her qualitative research class that I began to discover methodology that was appropriate for my topic. Her guidance, especially in those early days, is greatly appreciated. Conrad Glass offered a listening ear for my topic several times informally in the hallway after a class or in his office, perhaps without even knowing it. I found in this Methodist clergyman a person that it was easy to talk “church” with in the context of adult education, and his contribution to the content and form of the dissertation is so appreciated. Peter Hessling helped me to avoid several overstatements that we Baptists are prone to make. His own background in Catholic religious studies and qualitative methodology has been very helpful. John Pettitt, my chair, was assigned as my temporary advisor when I first entered the program. “Temporary” turned into five years. Both in class and out of class, John has helped many students like me explore their own world and perceptions in adult education. For his patience and tenacity to see me through this program, I am immensely grateful.
To God and Jesus Christ, I am grateful for allowing me to experience calling first hand. I cannot thank God enough for all that He means in my life, both academic and personal.
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Chapter One: Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Introduction

For two millennia, Christians have described their experiences with God in numerous ways. There are those who use anthropomorphic terms, as if God were their neighbor with whom they talk just like they do with their families and friends. They use language that suggests they hear the audible voice of God. The religious texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition may be the source of this type of language. For example, in the Bible, Abraham heard a voice that told him to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22:1-3; New International Version) and then to refrain from sacrificing him (Genesis 22:9-12). Moses heard a voice speaking to him out of a burning bush to go and lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 3:1-4:17). Paul heard a divine voice on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:3-9).

The use of such descriptions, however, is not confined to ancient religious texts. In a pilot study for this research, one respondent explained how God “spoke” to her about a younger friend who died of cancer only a few months after diagnosis:

When the word came that Janet Hanson was sick and I started praying, He [God] said, ‘Leave it.’ I didn't know what that meant. But He was telling me then that there was something better for Janet than what I could do. I did not stop praying for her; I stopped praying for healing because He had already told me that that was in His hands and to leave it alone.

Not all experiences describe a voice, however.

Some popular writers discuss their experiences as a voice from inside themselves that captures their attention and sometimes their obedience. Thus God is seen as a force that is implanted or created as a critical element in their mental and affective processes (Jones,
1996). Others use mystical language to describe an outside force that shapes or conquers their own wills (Palmer, 2000). In evangelical Christianity, some explain their experiences in terms of convictions arising out of their discourse with what they believe to be the written word of God, the Bible (Barnette, 1965; Tozer, 1948). Other descriptions see divine-human interactions as natural processes through which God endows believers with particular gifts and interests. It assumes that people can understand what God wants them to do by truly knowing themselves, their gifts, and their interests (Edge, 1971; Jones, 1996). The myriad lenses through which Christians view God affect how they talk about God’s interactions with them. Therefore, when they discuss how they come to a conviction that God wants them to do something, there are many diverse stories.

As a Christian educator, I am particularly interested in how people come to a conviction that God wants them to teach. It has been my perception through eighteen years of observation as a religious educator that people who have such a conviction have more longevity as teachers, a greater interest in developing teaching skills, and a more profound effect on their students. The popular terminology for describing the event or events that lead to this conviction is “calling.”

I have had an interest in the phenomenon of calling for over twenty years since the time I was seriously considering a two-year term as a Christian missionary. I was accepted into the program, but as part of our initiation, older and wiser advisors asked initiates to reconsider what it meant to be “called” to missionary service. I came away from that challenge convinced that I was not being called for missionary service. Ever since, I have been asking myself how I knew. Did God “talk” to me? Was it self-deception or some sort of self-recognition? As I face new phases of life and as I teach and counsel people in Baptist
churches who want to know and follow a “call” from God, I am all the more eager to be able to describe what it is.

In the years since that missionary initiation event, I have read what others have written about calling, struggled with my own continuing sense of calling, and even developed conferences and classes on the topic. However, the essence of spiritual calling is still difficult to describe out of my own experience, and the literature seems to fall short of describing the phenomenon comprehensively. Authors generally interpret calling from one or two particular perspectives of how God interacts with people, but how those interpretations are related to one another or to other perspectives is unclear. For example, Palmer (2000) suggests that calling does not come from an outer voice, but an inner one arising out of the very essence of who we are. The inward journey, he believes, is the beginning of calling. Barnette (1965), on the other hand, sees the starting point as biblical exposition. Calling, in the experience of people with whom I have counseled, seems to be broader than either one of these interpretations. What is lacking in the literature is a definition that is broad enough to encompass a wide variety of experiences and narrow enough to have meaning. The question I propose in this study then is “What is calling from the perspectives of those who have experienced it?”

Conceptual Framework

Interpretivist Ontology Defined

Researching a religious phenomenon like calling through the experiences of people with differing perspectives about God and how He communicates requires a conceptual framework that allows the researcher broad vision. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest that two philosophical areas influencing how the researcher views the world and conducts
research are epistemology and ontology. Epistemology focuses on the relationship between the knower and the known. Ontology concerns itself with the nature of reality. This study applies interpretivist ontology, treating calling as a phenomenon that is different for each individual because of what he/she brings into the experience. Admittedly subjective, this describes an epistemology, a relationship between the knower and the known that melds the knower and the known into a unique reality that only that individual can truly know.

Husserl, a nineteenth and early twentieth century philosopher building on the ideas of Hegel, distinguished between *cogitatum*, the object in nature that is being perceived, and *cogitatio*, an experience of the conscious mind. The *cogitatio* is different for every individual because he/she brings all that he/she is into the experience with the thing in nature. Therefore, how one perceives a tree is different from the way everyone else perceives it. One’s memories of a tree, full of life, outside his/her window as a small child, may play a part in how he/she perceives every tree. Husserl suggests that the beginning point of scientific inquiry is the *cogitatio*. The *cogitatum* is unknowable except through the experience that the individual has with it. Therefore, in studying the phenomenon of calling, it is the experience of each individual, the *cogitatio*, that is the primary focus of investigation (Moustakas, 1994).

*The Inadequacy of Positivist Ontology for This Study*

The realm of phenomenology seems to be a proper place to continue my investigation within this conceptual framework. Moustakas (1994) describes transcendental phenomenology as part of a larger reaction to “a science that failed to take into account the experiencing person and the connections between human consciousness and the objects that exist in the material world” (p. 43). The same type of reaction is evident in the field of
religious studies in which structures and doctrines, rather than the experiences of religious people, are used to describe religion (Smith, 1959).

Even in studies of Christianity by Christians, the understanding of events that happen in the spiritual lives of individuals are often shaped as much by established doctrine as by the experience itself. For example, Edward Hammett (1999), who is a proponent of Christians living out their calling even when it means breaking away from churches’ traditional ways of doing things, finds justification for his “radicalism” in theology. He states that “we must reclaim Pauline theology and the servant model of Christ as we learn to exercise our gifts and callings” (p.23) and that “calling . . . is the avenue of living out the incarnational faith we embrace” (p. 24).

For centuries, Protestant Christians have looked to theological doctrine to illuminate spiritual phenomena. John Wesley, the eighteenth century preacher and founder of Methodism, for example, was deemed fanatical by many of his contemporaries in the Church of England because he asserted that God had communicated directly to him, assuring him of his salvation. “That the Holy Spirit could reveal himself personally – bringing a word from the Lord – to a common believer was an idea that Wesley’s bishop, Bishop Butler, found abominable and thus inconceivable. For Butler, all the Christian needed was to be found through the logical teachings of the church” (Smith, 1997, p. 36). The battle over the role of experience versus the role of the canon of texts called the Bible continued into the field of comparative religions birthed a century ago. Many Christian opponents of the new field believed that the Bible not only offered the best explanations of spiritual phenomena, but also dictated the significance of those phenomena (Smith, 1959).
In a positivist worldview, reality is perceived to be stable and measurable, existing outside the one observing it. Objectivity is a primary goal of positivist research because it is believed that in an ideal world, researchers, devoid of any bias, can all see the same reality and thus confirm it. Therefore, researchers are obligated to detach themselves as much as possible from the phenomenon under investigation (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993). Assuming that a high degree of objectivity can actually be achieved in research, one depends on facts and principles to make an assertion about reality. Until there is other objective, quantified evidence that those facts and principles are faulty, the proposed understanding of reality stands.

However, the burden of proof generally lies with those trying to contradict long-established understandings of reality. One example of this dogmatic nature of science is reported by Craig Holdrege (1999), a scientist and educator who investigates presuppositions of evolutionary science and their shaping of interpretations of the classic peppered moth research in England in the late 1950s by Kettlewell. Holdrege agrees with evolutionary theory for the most part but says, in light of new information about the peppered moth, “A significant problem in the way science is taught, popularized, and in general filtered down into the minds of children is that students are filled with scientific dogmas: They ‘know’ that in evolution the fittest survive, they ‘know’ that the brain is a computer, they ‘know’ that the heart is a pump, they ‘know’ that genes determine heredity” (n.p.). This knowledge, he argues, tends to solidify into dogma that even evidence cannot overthrow.

Positivism is generally associated with scientific inquiry. However, a type of positivism has been very influential in Protestant Christianity ever since the Protestant Reformation, and it too can color one’s interpretation of experience. In reaction to abuses of
authority in the Catholic Church, Martin Luther and reformers that followed him established a high view of the authority of the Bible as the primary rule, the dogma, upon which one could depend for knowing what God expects of His people (Bainton, 1952).

Like science, religion in Western society can be dogmatic. Rather than being dogmatic over well-established principles derived at and supported by observation of the physical world, religion can be dogmatic over well-established principles derived at and supported by canonical writings, oral traditions, or interpretations thereof that have a tradition of perceived validity among a body of practitioners. For example, Henry and Richard Blackaby (2002) argue, “We must not take the words of Scripture and run them through the filter of our own beliefs and feelings in order to decide what the Bible verse means to us. Such an approach mistakenly elevates experience over the Word of God” (p. 9). To them, there is an objective reality that is reflected in the Bible. They do not deny the value of experiences; without them, they say, the Bible is a “lifeless set of doctrines” (p. 11). However, they believe experiences should be interpreted through the dogma of Scripture.

Case for Interpretivist Ontology as a Conceptual Framework

Western Protestant theology has become equated with the study and interpretation of the Bible at least partially because of this type of positivist ontology, the belief that a knowable reality exists and has been captured somehow in Scripture. Unlike science, religion does not use “objective” observation. Religious phenomena like calling are not measurable in the scientific sense, but are measured according to their consistency with the Bible, or one’s interpretation of the Bible. Just as the positivist perspective limits science to the realm of the observable and measurable, this religious positivism limits the phenomenon of calling to the realm of theology and doctrine.
Interpretivist ontology informs and expands the study of religious phenomena. It sees reality as an interaction between the known and the knower. In other words, each individual constructs reality as what is perceived collides with all that the knower brings to the experience of knowing. The object of research, the phenomenon to be studied, is the perception of the knower, not the external thing, the *cogitatum*. Such a view does not preclude the possibility of an objective thing to be perceived; it does preclude the idea that anyone can realize it without perceptual filters. Whether the *cogitatum* exists or not is of little consequence (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, an interpretivist researcher is less likely to define or prove the existence of the *cogitatum* than to describe admittedly subjective perspectives of it. These collective descriptions serve to construct a social meaning of phenomena.

*The Role of the Researcher*

Unlike the detached, objective observer role of positivism, the role of the researcher with this epistemology is complex. It includes personal involvement and empathetic understanding, requiring the researcher to enter the world of the subject (Glesne, 1999). It also has the potential of placing the researcher in a role as co-constructor of reality. His/her interaction with the subject has the potential of changing the subject’s perception, and his/her own perceptions influence how data are collected and interpreted. Though not impossible, scholarly rigor is much more difficult to establish.

The issue of detachment in religious studies has been a hotly debated issue for nearly a century. Prior to World War I, secular rationalists with a strong positivistic worldview accomplished the most significant advances in religious studies. During this period, “it was widely held in universities that a necessary qualification for an ‘impartial’ or scientific study
of religion . . . was that the student be without a faith of his own, be not engage” (Smith, 1959, p. 45). A scholar champion of an opposing view arose in Romania in the 1920s and remained productive for over fifty years as a proponent of the researcher/participant. In his youthful writings in the 1920s, Mircea Eliade made some strong claims about the role of empathy in the investigation of religious phenomena. In these early days, he expressed the need for the scholar to be a believer to adequately interpret such phenomena (Allen, 1998). Smart (1973) illustrates this point with the phenomenon of prayer. An unbeliever, he says, may observe prayer and record the words, but would not fully grasp the phenomenon without understanding “the nature of the Focus at which [the prayer is] directed” (p. 56). This understanding, he believes, depends on personal experience. My role as researcher in this study was affected by my Christian beliefs and experience with calling, and I believe that background helped me understand better the experiences of those whom I interviewed. However, such attachment to the phenomenon can cause problems too.

Eliade’s contemporaries attacked him for pushing his own theological agenda, allowing a distinctly Christian bias to shape his interpretation of religious or mythical data. After his early years, he seldom spoke of his personal convictions, perhaps for fear of giving ammunition to his critics. Later in his long life of scholarship, Eliade tempered his views to allow that "the interpreter must believe in the mythic phenomena in the sense of taking them seriously, acknowledging that for mythic people the myths are real, and trying, at least as part of one's scholarship, to empathize with and describe just what myths and their reality claims mean for mythic people” (Allen, 1998, p. 10).

Empathy does not have to preclude rigorous scholarship, however. Transcendental phenomenology provides a vehicle with established methodology that allows the researcher
to achieve some degree of scholarly detachment required in qualitative research. Methods for gaining empathy, however, are not as easily prescribed.

Therefore, ontologically, the conceptual framework of this study is interpretivistic. Epistemologically, it assumes that the knower and the known are essential elements that collide and create the phenomenon under investigation. Given this framework, the researcher must be aware of and deal with how his/her own experience interacts with the object of study. The methodology one uses to accomplish this will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Significance of the Study

To Practice

An increased understanding of the meaning and essence of calling could have a significant impact on the evangelical church in America. A sense of calling is critical in terms of motivation, especially among lay leaders (Barnette, 1965; Edge, 1971; Jones, 1996; Palmer, 2000). It is their work that makes the ministry of the evangelical church possible, and their work is generally not rewarded monetarily. However, an understanding that they are “called” by God to particular ministries provides motivation. On the other hand, ignorance about calling can be detrimental to churches and “may be at the root of much of the discouragement, insecurity, frustration and guilt that plagues many Christians and curtails their total effectiveness for God” (Wagner, 1994, p. 24).

In the past, the Church has abused this connection between calling and motivation. It called forth untold thousands of peasants to march off to the Crusades to free the Holy Land from highly organized and well-trained Muslim armies. Although most of the Crusades ended in disaster, untrained peasants still marched off to their deaths, motivated by a sense of call. Evangelical Christian leaders still have the capability of herding unsuspecting laymen
and laywomen into crusades of some sort or other. Jim Jones and David Koresh are only two of a host of examples of people who led entire groups to follow a “call” to their own demise.

It is critical for laypeople to understand their own sense of calling, not one imposed on them by ecclesiastics. The first step in this process is having some understanding of what calling is, from both a theological and a phenomenological perspective. As individual members of the Church process their own sense of personal calling, there can be a democratization of the ministries of the Church marked by an empowerment of the laity to do the work of the Church. Such empowerment engenders motivation at the most basic level of Church organization, the rank and file members. As they come to a better understanding of personal calling, they no longer serve the Church as much as they become the Church serving.

To Research

The proposed study can contribute to the practice of individual Christians and the churches of which they are a part, but it could also contribute to research. As a phenomenological study, it does not attempt to explain a phenomenon, but to describe it richly. By describing personal experiences of lay teachers with calling, I hope to add to the literature in the phenomenology of religion, which serves as a basis for much of modern comparative religion studies.

My study is not intended to contend with theology, but to back away from it in order to investigate calling from a different viewpoint. Groome (1980) argues that “while Christian educators must be informed by reliable theological scholarship, the scholars must also be informed by the lived faith of a Christian community” (p. 228). Theology informs an
understanding of calling, but it must also be informed by the perceptions of people who experience it. This study will focus on those lived experiences.

The study may serve to enhance theologians’ abilities to interpret biblical texts concerning the phenomenon of calling. With a rich description of the experiences of modern lay people with calling, theologians will have an experiential base against which to test their interpretations. For example, this study could support or show inconsistencies in theological interpretations of what Jesus meant when He told His disciples that He would send the *paraclete*, the Holy Spirit, to comfort, counsel and guide them (John 14:26). Furthermore, theologians could use the results of this study to place their interpretations in a modern context, making them more meaningful for today’s believer. Such an enhancement is long overdue.

*Limitations of the Study*

This study of the phenomenon of calling has several limitations, some by the nature of phenomenology itself and others by the criteria used to choose participants in the study. As a phenomenological study, the purpose of this study was to compile a rich textural description of the experiences of those who have experienced calling and to make an informed attempt “to describe how the phenomenon is experienced” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 78). “Phenomenology is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (p. 58). It does not offer explanations of the said phenomenon. It does not try to prove or disprove that the phenomenon can be scientifically verified. The phenomenon it describes is “that which appears in [the] consciousness” of the participants.
Therefore, this study has no lofty goals like proving or disproving that a divine being actually “talks” to people and reveals His will to them. Nor does it attempt to explain why people experience calling. It simply reports what calling means to these participants.

The pool from which I drew participants is admittedly narrow. Since my primary interest is how Sunday school teachers I work with come to a sense of calling, I did not broaden the scope of my study to include other religious or even other Christian groups. All of the participants are professing Christians and, more specifically, Southern Baptists from western North Carolina. Because the participants share a distinct belief system and culture, the resulting textural description makes no claim to universality. It would be very interesting to compare the results of this study with similar studies done among other groups and cultures, but those comparisons are beyond the scope of this study.

Definitions

There are several writing conventions and words used in this study by both me and my participants that may need to be explained. The word “God” is capitalized when it is used as a name for a divinity by participants and by me. It is not capitalized when referring to a divinity in the generic sense. The second convention is one I share with many writers – the capitalization of pronouns referring specifically to God. According to The Little-Brown Handbook (1980), my old college grammar, such capitalization is optional in most contexts, and I find that it sometimes clarifies the antecedent as God in the conversation of my participants. Therefore, I stuck with the convention throughout this study.

Following are words that may be unfamiliar to some followed by definitions as I used the words in this study:
**Altar call** - A portion of the worship service practiced in many evangelical churches. It is a time, usually at the end of the service, in which people are encouraged and given the opportunity to come to the front of the congregation to make some spiritual decision public.

**Association** - A voluntary alliance of churches that cooperate in mission and educational endeavors. It is the predominant diocesan structure used by Southern Baptists. It differs from most diocesan structures in that it holds no political or even theological authority over the constituent churches.

**Laypeople** - People who are not ordained as clergy (i.e. who are not pastors or professional ministers).

**Parachurch organization** - A religious organization that is not officially affiliated with any particular church or denomination, but functions to supplement the ministries of churches.

**Pentecostal Holiness** - An evangelical Christian denomination known for its emphasis on the use of charismatic gifts.

**Primitive Baptists** - One of the many variant subgroups of Baptists. They hold in common with other Baptists the belief in baptism of believers only by immersion. There are many finer points of distinction, but one that relates to the present study is the belief that Sunday school, as it is practiced by most Baptists, is not an appropriate medium for religious instruction because it lacks a biblical
precedent.

**Sunday school** - the primary educational program in the vast majority of Southern Baptist churches. The primary content is Bible study. Teachers and administrators of this program are predominantly laypeople. In most churches, classes are the basic units of the school, and they exist for all age groups from preschooler to senior adult.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The Literature

I have identified three different strands of literature that relate to calling. The first is the literature that directly addresses calling or the experiences that accompany it. This strand includes several writers from different time periods whom I have arranged in a chronological sequence to get a feel for historical shifts in thinking about the phenomenon of calling. Secondly, I have chosen to review literature on motivational theory that I believe relates to the phenomenon of calling. Last, I have taken a look at writers who address adult education organizational issues that I believe relate to the way one perceives calling.

Literature on Calling and the Experiences that Accompany It

The main sources that attempt to explain or describe the phenomenon of calling are religious texts and the theological treatments and interpretations of those texts. A few attempts have been made to talk about the phenomenon through popular Sunday school textbooks for religious educators, but little in the way of research exists. The textbooks generally are theologically or anecdotally based.

The lack of a good research base plagues the entire field of religious education (McKenzie & Harton, 2002). This is one reason this present study is so important. As a phenomenological study, it can serve as a basis for other research to follow. However, there is a dearth of research literature on the subject of calling now. Therefore, I will focus on religious and anecdotal literature that has served as sources of information for both my participants and me.

There are many notable biblical expressions of calling and giftedness. God verbally called Moses to the particular task of leading Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land
(Exodus 3:1-9). God called Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem by placing a “burden” on his heart (Nehemiah 1:1-4). In the New Testament, Jesus personally called several disciples to the particular ministry of apostleship in Matthew 4:18-22. Paul reports an epiphany of the resurrected Christ, calling him to embrace apostleship instead of persecuting the early Church in Acts 9:1-18. Timothy’s calling, described by Paul in I Timothy 4:11-16, was confirmed and maybe even recognized by the spiritual gifts that Paul perceived God gave Timothy. These biblical passages along with others have served as touchstones for Christians who seek to understand how God calls people to a particular task.

Christian history also cites some notable examples of calling. One that sounds particularly down-to-earth and similar to those related to me by participants in this study is found in the personal recollections of John Bunyan, a preacher in seventeenth century England. He talks about a process of gift-recognition first by his elders and then a growing self-recognition as he stepped out to use his gifts of biblical discernment and communication. He talks about the struggle he underwent to understand his calling and the extreme importance of encouragement from those whom he taught (Bunyan, 1873).

A. W. Tozer (1948) speaks to the experience of calling from an evangelical Christian perspective. His premise is that our pursuit of knowing God and His will is not possible without God’s initiation. It is God, he says, who pursues us and wants to speak to us. In fact, God speaks continuously and His word, once spoken, continues to speak. From Tozer’s perspective, the Bible is more than a record of God speaking to others in the ancient past; it speaks today to those who are willing to listen. Thus, one can begin the process of understanding calling and giftedness by opening oneself up to meanings of the Bible.
However, Tozer argues that one’s ability to perceive specific directions from the Bible depends on his acceptance and compliance with the lordship of Christ.

Although Mircea Eliade does not talk about calling specifically in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), he talks about hierophanies, the manifestations of the sacred among the profane. According to Eliade, one of the functions of religion is to mark the places where hierophanies occur as portals where communication occurs between two different modes of existence. He argues that in Western culture, desacralized man sees no heterogeneity in space. One space is the same as another, no more or less sacred. Eliade indicates that primordial man seems to have had less difficulty and thus was more open to the idea of portals where communication between God and humankind occurs and where calling is likely to happen.

Henlee Barnette (1965), an evangelical scholar, is in basic agreement with Tozer. He does not go into the same philosophical depth, but he seems to assume the critical role that the Bible plays in calling. His starting point for investigation into the experience of calling is biblical exposition. Four of his seven chapters delineate what the Bible says about calling and its relationship to spiritual gifts or *charismata*. A major tenet he proposes is that “calling” applies equally to both clergy and laity. Historical distinctions between the calling of clergy and laity, he argues, are artificial layers of meaning applied to the original intent of the New Testament.

Findley Edge (1971) speaks of calling as “something that is quite nebulous and difficult to discern” (p. 140). His treatment of calling deals more with practical steps to discern it rather than Biblical citations to explain it. He offers three principles he used to discern his own calling. The first is the occurrence of a “Eureka” experience in which the
subject feels right about responding to a certain area of ministry. Because of the subjective nature of feelings, Edge recommends that these feelings be discussed and processed through a group that is “concerned and knowledgeable” (p. 141). The second principle is creative preoccupation with a ministry. The subject will simply be able to come up with an abundance of ideas of what to do in that ministry as he/she thinks about it. The third principle is the need to talk about that area of ministry. The subject “doesn’t talk about it because he feels he ‘ought’ to, but because he wants to because of his great interest and concern” (p.142). Edge implies a universality of these principles, but universality is a bit premature. His “principles” are really anecdotal, recitations of things that worked for him as he struggled with discerning his own calling.

There is an abundance of literature on spiritual gifts that has been created since 1970. Although references to charismata are evident throughout Christian history, modern elaborations on the place of spiritual gifts in one’s calling were slow to come. According to C. Peter Wagner (1994), the Pentecostal movement of the early twentieth century emphasized spiritual gifts, but mainstream churches labeled its teachings as heretical. Because Pentecostals at that time were part of a grass-roots movement in Christianity and terribly distrustful of high levels of education, little scholarship was generated concerning spiritual gifts and their relationship to calling. According to Wagner, it was not until 1972 with the publication of Ray Stedman’s Body Life and its rise to the top seller list that spiritual gifts became an accepted topic for discussion among mainline Christian churches. In the book, this highly respected leader, who was not Pentecostal, legitimized spiritual gifts as a topic for non-Pentecostal scholarship.
Although not directly related to the experiences of calling and gift-recognition, the study of Margolis and Elifson (1979) attempts to provide a typology for mystical religious experiences. This typology is helpful in coming to an understanding of how people experience what they see as God’s call in their lives. Using content analysis of sixty-nine reported religious experiences, Margolis and Elifson identify four basic types. The Transcendental Experience “involves coming into contact with a higher or metaphysical plane of reality; and this contact dramatically changes the way the subject perceives himself and the world” (p. 64). The second type, the “Vertigo Experience,” is described as an experience that is disorienting, at least temporarily, to the subject. The third type is called “Life Change Experience” and is based on vague descriptions of experiences that mark beginnings of profound changes in the way the subject feels or thinks about things. The fourth type, known as the “Visionary Experience,” describes experiences such as dreams, voices, and other experiences of what they perceive to be “genuine contact with a divine presence” (p. 66). Margolis and Elifson’s study was like the present one in that it collected primary data from interviewing people with a designated experience, but their purpose did not focus on calling.

Rehm's (1990) understanding of calling has its roots in spirituality. She describes it as a phenomenon steeped in mystery and subjectivity. It is informed by “experience with abstract insights” (p. 120), but it is developed only with a great deal of effort involving the shaping and reshaping of “subjective desire.” She traces the ideas of calling back to the writings of Paul, but points out that the Church interpreted the meaning of calling narrowly to apply only to the few in clerical orders. She does not treat lay orders and the special category of sainthood to which people were “called” throughout Church history, however. Starting
with Luther and the Reformation, she argues, calling became a phenomenon shared by ordinary people in ordinary stations of life.

When she attempts to show modern equivalents of calling, she does not describe it as something that happens to a person. Rather it is something the person plays a major part in developing through will (shaped by and shaping one's gifts and satisfactions), inner reflection, and reflection on the effect of the call on the common good. These are not separate phases of understanding one's call, but they constantly interplay with each other. Calling is thus "developed over time as gifts are learned and redefined in light of relations to others" (p. 121). To this point in my research, Rehm is the only writer who attempts to describe what calling is from a non-biblical perspective. She articulates that educators need to learn the lessons of the Church on how to embrace calling to instill a new, creative force in the field of education. However, her view is more humanistic than most theological interpretations of calling in that it assumes that people are naturally driven to support the common good and the source of calling ultimately lies within the individual rather than with an outside source of inspiration.

In his book *Adult Education as Vocation*, Michael Collins (1991), argues that vocation of adult educators is a concern that is marginalized by the technical rationality that has dominated both modern and post-modern mindsets. He believes that the prevailing practice of adult education is more interested in the means than the end. It is a practice that focuses on technique and reason and, thus, loses touch with the reflection on practice critical to an understanding of calling. "Vocational commitment, on the other hand, implies a refusal to be satisfied with the greater sophistication of technique, including consensus-forming strategies, as the sole end of one's activity" (p. 42).
However, Collins never attempts to define vocation, or calling. His main point is that calling is something that brings with it a clear sense of mission. He identifies calling as a necessity to overcome the hegemony of the "cult of efficiency," so predominant in adult education practice, but he does not deal with what it is or how one comes to recognize it.

Wimberly's *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (1994) suggests a method for involving intergenerational groups in reflection on their personal sense of calling. She alludes to roots that go back to an informal educational practice of slaves in America, but does not really trace the practice back historically. Although the method focuses on an African American perspective, the methodology could be adapted to any cultural group, especially those in what Freire (1985) calls silent societies, trapped in a repressive culture of silence. The method that Wimberly refers to as *story-linking* starts with engaging learners in an everyday story, preferably one of their own. The facilitator then guides the group to link that story with a biblical story and then with a faith story from the African American heritage. The group then is led to address vocation, what it is God wants them to do as a result of their personal, biblical, and cultural reflection. Thus she alludes to calling as a critical issue for her culture and even addresses processes for discovering it, but she does not attempt to define it.

Laurie Beth Jones (1996) attempts to provide practical guidance to those who are seeking their calling for work and life. She begins with the idea that “[p]eople cannot find their missions until they know themselves” (p. 26). “Therefore,” she argues, “it is important to take the time to get a more clear picture of who we really think we are” (p. 27). She then presents exercises of self-discovery to be used individually or as a group, providing rationale for the efficacy of those exercises in determining a life mission or calling. She focuses on
discovering passions and perceiving giftedness, two things she considers cornerstones for discerning calling.

Alice Cullinan’s *Sorting it out: Determining God’s call to ministry* (1999) is based largely on her personal experiences as a professional religious educator and a survey taken by 365 men and women who had “felt and answered God’s call to ministry” (p. x). She recognized several common elements in the experiences of people with calling: a discomfort or restlessness with one’s present situation, “an inner tug or word from God,” and affirmations from others in the Church (pp. 22-23). Her treatment of calling is heavily theological, but she recognizes several points at which people must process both theological and emotional data introspectively and logically. Of all the literature I surveyed, Dr. Cullinan’s book most closely reflects the experience of participants in this study even though she dealt with calling to professional ministry. However, most of the subjects of her survey were Southern Baptists as the participants of this study are.

Parker J. Palmer (2000) suggests that calling is not an outer voice, but an inner one arising out of the very essence of who we are. It is a Judeo/Christian concept in that he equates “who we are” with the “who God created us to be.” His concept of calling is driven by transcendental philosophy, which focuses on the “inward journey” and the discovery of one’s own inner truth. These, he believes, are the keys to vocational recognition. The true self, he argues, is filled with potentials and limitations. Both, he says, should be considered as one attempts to discover his/her true self and, thus, his/her calling.

Henry and Richard Blackaby’s *Hearing God’s Voice* (2002) treats calling as God’s communication of His will for one’s life, of which a person becomes aware through a combination of several processes. One must learn how God speaks by reviewing biblical
accounts, prepare his/her heart to “hear,” become aware of the theological significance of life circumstances, and listen to Christians surrounding him/her. The authors emphasize that a balance between sound doctrine based on the Bible and an intimate relationship with God must be maintained in order to really “hear” God’s voice. They even offer suggestions about how such a relationship can be developed, but they do not really define what “relationship” is. Instead, they offer biblical instruction on how to develop it and assume people will “know it” when it comes. Therefore, the book is predominantly theological in nature, and unapologetically so.

This literature looks at the phenomenon of calling from many perspectives. There is a basic agreement that calling is a focal point for ministry, work, and/or life. However, differences exist. This survey suggests that viewpoints may fall in and out of predominance. In the mid twentieth century when many of my participants received religious training, calling was defined in biblical terms. To understand calling, it was thought, one needed to understand what the Bible said about it. With the exception of Blackaby and Blackaby (2002) and Cullinan (1999), in the last couple of decades the predominant perspective seems to focus more on knowing ourselves than on knowing the Bible.

The proposed study falls more in line with the philosophical stance more predominant in later literature. It starts with the individuals who have experienced calling and listens to their stories rather than to a particular interpretation of biblical texts on calling. However, those individuals may be heavily influenced by the Bible, and church doctrine may be so intertwined in their interpretation of the events of calling in their lives that it could be very difficult, if not impossible, to totally separate the two. The literature does not deal with the
question posed in this research, namely, the essence of “calling,” what it actually is in the experience of the Christian lay teacher.

**Motivation Literature**

Motivational theory offers several vantage points to begin investigating the phenomenon of calling. The dichotomy of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation gives a base from which one can question assumptions about the source of calling. Incentive/goal theories help one explore how calling moves someone to invest his/her sense of self into the task of teaching. Cognitive consistency theories help one address changes in behavior brought about by calling. Like calling, motivation is a phenomenon that is difficult to define. It is not something that is observed; it can only be inferred by trying to establish a relationship between stimulus and response in the form of a behavior change (Petri, 1996). However, research in the area of motivation is helpful in an understanding of calling because it attempts to address why people do what they do, the same concern in the study of calling.

*Calling - extrinsic or intrinsic?* Sources of motivation are either extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic sources are rewards that come from outside the person like grades, presents, or oral commendations. Intrinsic sources are those that lie within the person like feelings of accomplishment, pleasure, or pain. Although extrinsic sources are used by many educators, much modern research is recognizing that intrinsic sources provide the most successful motivation for long-term learning (Bandura, 1982; Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984).

Bandura (1982) does not decry the use of extrinsic rewards, but warns that unless they contribute to self-efficacy and self-motivation, they can lead to decreased interest and motivation in an activity. Extrinsic motivations, he says are successful for the long-term only when there are “intervening processes of goal-setting and self-evaluative reactions” (p. 134).
When extrinsic motivation is translated to a drive to achieve self-satisfaction by these processes, intrinsic motivation is created. Intrinsic motivation, in his study, gives one an ability to persist longer that one who is pursuing extrinsic rewards alone.

Lent, Brown, and Larkin (1984) extended Bandura’s self-efficacy theory to the world of academics. According to their study, academic self-efficacy seems to be “an important cognitive factor relative to the educational/vocational behavior of students considering engineering and science fields” (p. 362). Both of these studies indicate that intrinsic motivation is born out of self-efficacy, a belief that one can accomplish a desired goal.

Kroth and Boverie (2000) suggest that there are three possible sources for life mission: biological, social, and spiritual. Biological sources are intrinsic and include instincts and drives which are encoded in human DNA for the survival of the species. Social sources are extrinsic and are those expectations of society, family, and friends communicated overtly and covertly, presumably for the survival of the social status quo. This paper will focus on the spiritual, which Kroth and Boverie describe as either a summons or a strong inclination.

If calling is a summons, it would seem to be a source of extrinsic motivation. If it is an inclination, it would seem to be a source of intrinsic motivation. Is it one or the other, or can it be both? Calling is both a strong sense of mission and the events that lead up to that sense of mission. Gordon Smith (1999) says that calling comes from God and that it is an act of unmerited favor when God invites one to join Him as a co-worker. However, he goes on to say, “And we can only discover and embrace our vocation if we individually come to terms with ourselves. The discernment we need comes from looking at ourselves and nurturing a capacity for self-perception” (p. 35).
Calling - incentive or goal? Incentives and goals are common focal points for many motivational theories, but there is some disagreement about their meanings. In Lewin (1938) and Bindra (1959), incentives and goals are the same. Lewin believes that people operate in a force field of various, competing incentives. The strongest incentive wins the behavior. Bindra speaks of an incentive as a goal when it is the focus of an investigator's analysis, when motivation for a behavior is under investigation, but the idea of the incentive as a force field that pushes or pulls someone to action remains intact in his theory.

Some of the religious literature on calling reviewed earlier recognizes calling as a force that bends the will of the individual experiencing it. For example, one faith story tells of Jeremiah, the preacher who spoke to an apathetic audience for decades about the eminent fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. In the biblical text, he says of his calling to preach,

O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot (Jeremiah 20:7-9).

The story of Jeremiah’s struggle with a compelling force is shared by some modern writers. For example, Palmer (2000) describes calling as something one “can’t not do” (p. 25), a mysterious compulsion that cannot be explained or even understood completely. The idea that calling is one of many incentives that compete for one’s behavior provides one way of examining calling.
Klinger (1977) makes a finer distinction between incentives and goals which can further inform an understanding of calling as a motivational force. He defines an incentive as anything that attracts or repels a person, but it may or may not be a goal. A goal is an incentive which a person commits to actively pursue or avoid. Commitment introduces an element of volition into the equation of motivation.

Malcolm Knowles (1973) recognizes volition as a primary characteristic of adult learning. He calls it self-direction and argues that as one matures into adulthood, he/she develops a need to be perceived as self-directing. According to Knowles, when the adult is not allowed to be self-directing in a learning situation, resentment and resistance to learning occur.

Rehm (1990) argues that the source of calling ultimately lies within the individual rather than with an outside source of inspiration. She says, “Whether an ancient prophet or modern teacher, the individual’s phenomenological sense of calling guides will and action along meaningful and higher ideas” (p. 119). She does not deny a religious nature of calling, but to her the ultimate source of inspiration is from within. Calling, to her, is not something that happens to a person. It is developed out of personal volition in an attempt to shape a better world. The will both shapes and is shaped by one’s gifts and satisfactions. Calling is realized through a constant interplay of the will and a "spirit of subjectivity," which seems to be related to reflection. It involves recognition of how one's motivations and gifts contribute to the common good. However, she dismisses the idea that true calling is initiated by any external force.

Volition or self-direction takes one back to the question of whether calling is an imposed demand or a willful self-discovery. Can the adult Sunday school teacher remain
motivated if his/her calling is only an incentive, a force that has exerted more pressure than other incentives in his/her life? The importance of the will in adult learning and motivational theory demands that the role of volition in calling be examined because it could provide some understanding of how calling interfaces with the individual’s sense of self.

Another aspect of incentive theories that can inform a study of calling is the distinction between ultimate and subsidiary incentives. The perceived value of an incentive changes constantly (Bindra, 1959; Klinger, 1977). If one is successful at achieving the incentive, he/she can become satiated and the value of the incentive will decrease. For example, if satisfying hunger is an incentive, that incentive loses value after a large meal. Another factor that affects the value placed on an incentive is expectancy. Good prospects of achieving the incentive increases its value while poor prospects of achieving the incentive decrease its value (Feather, 1961). However, some incentives derive their value from the value placed on other incentives. Klinger refers to these as subsidiary incentives. In an address to Adult School teachers in England in 1814, Pole (1969) illustrates this dichotomy of incentives:

The desire of being beloved by our fellow-creatures is a principle inherent in human nature; but to be beloved of Him, on whom not only our present comfort, but eternal happiness depends, is the summit of present and future felicity. The best way of proving to ourselves and the world that we love the God of Truth, and that [H]e has the pre-eminence in our affections, is to feed [H]is sheep and [H]is lambs (p. 97).

For Pole, the incentive of praise from fellow-creatures is short-lived, and cannot sustain one’s commitment to teach Sunday school. However, the love bestowed by God and the hope of eternal happiness can continue to drive the teacher.
Klinger (1977) supports Pole’s proposition by explaining that incentives that are remote, not immediately realizable, keep their value longer as long as the subject remains convinced that they are achievable. A very strong incentive to teach Sunday school, therefore, is that higher incentive to please God (the ultimate incentive for one who commits his/her life to the lordship of Christ). The incentive to teach stays strong even after one achieves a teaching ministry, not necessarily because of inherent fulfillment but because it is subsidiary to an incomplete goal that retains its value.

**Calling as cognitive dissonance or cognitive consistency.** Cognitive consistency and cognitive dissonance theories of motivation assume that humans attempt to maintain a consistency between beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts with the behavior that they outwardly display (Petri, 1996). For example, when one believes he/she should teach adults and actions are not consistent with that belief, he/she is motivated either to change behavior and begin teaching or modify the belief. Until one or the other is changed, the individual lives in an uncomfortable tension. That uncomfortable tension produces motivation.

Several writers have recognized that people are motivated to change in order to create consistency. Wlodkowski (1999) mentions change events as times when the adult learner alters previous goals, attitudes and/or behaviors. He points to education as the starting place for many of these change events. Vogel (1991) associates calling with these times of disruption in a person’s life. According to her, a call will come as a result of dissonance or, like education, will produce dissonance.

Freire (1993) argues that it is necessary to help oppressed people discover dissonance between their sociological plight and their sense of justice in order for them to act to correct their plight. Conscientization, according to Freire, is the human ability to objectify the world
and one’s self, to see both as separate from present reality. Only by objectifying the situation and themselves do they see the dissonance and become motivated to deal with the situation constructively.

Mezirow’s (1990) “critical reflection” is similar to Freire’s conscientization. It too places an emphasis on the need for individuals to question the validity of presuppositions learned at an earlier time. According to Mezirow, those presuppositions can be transformed only by recognizing or naming them and then reflecting on them. The dissonance that can result motivates to action.

Investigators of calling can use cognitive consistency theories in a couple of ways. First, motivation arising from cognitive dissonance may be hard, if not impossible, to distinguish from calling. If motivation is the tension between cognition (beliefs, attitudes, knowledge) and overt behavior, what some people identify as calling may simply be a natural tension, perhaps magnified by some change event or crisis. Such an interpretation takes the spiritual element out of calling and relegates calling to the purely psychological. For example, a woman has a compulsion to become an adult Sunday school teacher after her mother passes away. The death of her mother makes her rethink what really matters in life, and she becomes committed to the idea that Christian education is a primary way to face eternity, an idea vehemently expressed earlier by her mother. However, her behavior is inconsistent with that belief; she occasionally attends Sunday school and rarely studies the Bible on her own. In order to overcome this dissonance between a new belief and present action, she is motivated to teach an adult class. Is this a calling or an example of cognitive dissonance at work? Or can it be both? Even if the investigator is committed to the idea that
calling is a spiritual phenomenon, an understanding of cognitive dissonance can help him to question assumptions and evidence.

Second, if the investigator views calling as a phenomenon that causes cognitive dissonance, he/she can trace calling by investigating the dissonance that results. For example, a man who long resisted invitations to teach decides that it is time to teach a Sunday school class. Observing an overt behavior change, the investigator can use consistency theory to assume that a change in belief, attitude or knowledge has occurred in the subject. Investigation could focus on identifying the change and tracing its cause.

Another aspect of consistency theory informs the investigator of a possible obstacle in researching the phenomenon of calling - post-decisional dissonance. A classic example cited by Petri (1996) is when two different sets of subjects are given payment to convince other people that a dull, boring task is actually quite interesting and fulfilling. The first group are given $1 each while the second group are given $20 each. Later when asked about what they thought of the task, the $1 group consistently rated the task more interesting and fulfilling than the $20 group. According to Petri, they placed higher value on the task in order to justify their expenditure of energy in it. Post-decisional dissonance could complicate a simple recollection of the phenomenon of calling. What one recalls may be an enhanced version of what actually happened in order to justify the time, effort, and life energy poured into a volunteer teaching job.

Because motivation and calling both deal with why people do what they do, each can inform the other. In fact the lines between the two are often blurry at best, and it may be impossible to separate the two completely. Diverse motivational theories can provide different vantage points for the investigator of calling. They can help the investigator to
formulate questions to help those who have experienced calling to articulate what has happened to them to shape their beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and behavior.

*Adult Education Programming Literature*

When one perceives that he/she is called to teach adults in Sunday school, that perception usually occurs in the context of an organization. There is little question that organizations exert a profound influence on the perceived social roles of their constituent members through a consensus of expectations (Baker & Associates, 2001; Klinger, 1977). Since calling to adult Sunday school teaching leads one to a social role recognized by a church organization, the climate of the organization can enhance, shape, or impede one’s perception of calling. Rehm (1990) states it this way: “Because modern bureaucracy, specialization, and dependence on experts and instrumental policies present great structural barriers in all areas of life, individuals can fail to manifestly create and use gifts. . . . Sometimes the individual simply cannot find a concrete place that allows the freedom to carry out intended good will” (pp. 122-123). The ability of individuals to perceive a calling to teach adult Sunday school is enhanced by the health of the organization. I base this contention on the idea that healthy organizations remove the barriers that stifle the creativity of those who do the work (Brookfield, 1986; Collins, 1991; Houle, 1972; Senge, 1990; Smith, 1999; Stenmark, n.d.; Vogel, 1991).

Most popular adult education programming models used today are conceptual as opposed to linear (Boone, 1985; Brookfield, 1986; Caffarella, 2002; Tyler, 1971). Rather than following sequential steps, the models use interrelated principles that impact each other throughout the process of programming. These models view change as a primary outcome of programming and generally include a basic framework of planning, design and
implementation, and evaluation. Each of these aspects of programming can affect one’s perception of calling by creating an organizational climate in which one responds to his/her calling. Conceptual programming processes are organic; every part continually affects the others. However, issues that come to light in the sub-processes of planning and evaluation are especially relevant to a study of calling.

*Planning*. Planning is the process whereby adult educational organizations’ purposes and goals are linked with the needs of the publics they are trying to serve (Boone, 1985). According to Caffarella (2002), it involves interpreting structural, political, and cultural factors in the organization and the wider community. It is not a one-time process, but a continuous process that involves environmental scanning and assessment of needs, purposes, and resources. Although it is not directly associated with calling, it impacts and is impacted by calling. Therefore, a review of adult education literature about planning is appropriate in a study of calling.

Lindeman (1961), Freire (1993), and Collins (1991) all point out that education is political. Because of education’s political nature, planning can be manipulated to serve the interest of an individual or an organization. Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, much of Sunday school has been driven by curriculum publishing houses, both denominational and non-denominational, that have business and ideological interests in catering to the *status quo* (Eavey, 1964). Based on their views of hegemony in education, the authors cited above would see a conflict of interests in this situation.

In fact, Freire (1985) has some pretty scathing remarks for churches that perpetuate an agenda that does not seek and respond to the input of the illiterate with whom he worked. He speaks of churches "freezing to death in the warm bosom of the bourgeoisie" (p. 131). He
defines a traditionalist church as one that sees itself as a haven to the oppressed. This type of church ultimately serves the purposes of the dominant elite. The modernizing church is only a revised version of the traditionalist church. It maintains the status quo by reforming the structures of the church without radically transforming them. They have the illusion of progressing while they stand still. "It speaks of the poor or of the underprivileged rather than the oppressed" (p. 136). Their purpose is self-perpetuation accomplished through a thinly masked alliance with the dominant elite.

Planning is best carried out as a collaborative effort of educators and students. Freire (1987) says,

When curriculum designers ignore important variables such as social-class differences, when they ignore the incorporation of the subordinate cultures' values in the curriculum, and when they refuse to accept and legitimize the students' language, their actions point to the inflexibility, insensitivity, and rigidity of a curriculum that was designed to benefit those who wrote it (p. 124).

Houle (1972) points out that it is especially important that the designing of a format for adult education be a collaborative art. Kêung (1976) describes good Christian education as a mutual act between teacher and student that is not repressive in either direction. Knowles (1996) acknowledges a need for adults to be self-directed in their learning, having input at every level possible.

A sense of calling allows the lay teacher to be less subject to the elitist culture that dominates an organization (Collins, 1991). When those in authority seek compliance among
teachers rather than collaboration in the planning process, it undermines their sense of calling and represses the creativity born in that sense of calling (Smith, 1999).

*Evaluation.* Programming is viewed by modern adult educators as an evaluative tool (Boone, 1985; Brookfield, 1986; Caffarella, 2002; Tyler, 1971). Evaluation is used throughout the process in planning and assessment of needs to be met, in improving the program along the way (formative evaluation), and in justifying the existence or continuation of the program (Knox, 1986). The models not only have evaluation as one of their components; the programming process in each evaluates the adult education organization’s relevance and effectiveness in its environment. “[W]ithout effective mechanisms to implement renewal, the organization becomes progressively less well adapted to its environment and, like the dinosaur, eventually becomes extinct” (Boone, 1985, p. 156). Therefore, evaluation is essential to organizational health and survival.

The process constantly calls the organization to renewal. According to Boone (1985), a programming model should emphasize proactivity in the change arena. Programming is not primarily a response to a shifting environment although that is a part of its purpose. Rather, programming is a means to define, anticipate, and even construct change. It views the adult education organization, learners, and leaders as essential pieces of the programming puzzle. All play collaborative roles in evaluating the program. Together they identify, assess, and analyze needs that serve as the bases for evaluation as well as design and implementation.

Knox (1986), Queeney (1995), Tyler (1971), Boone (1985), and most of the evaluation models spawned by Kirkpatrick (1996) in the field of Training and Development express the need for predefined criteria in the process of evaluation of learning. Caffarella
(2002) suggests that evaluation criteria be placed on every instructional plan. One question these theories raise is, “Who determines the criteria?”

Collins (1991) suggests that although criteria are needed, predetermining them can limit the scope of evaluation. In the hands of those who support the status quo, evaluation can perpetuate an organization into irrelevance. Scriven (1993) has proposed a goal-free approach to evaluation, believing that predetermined criteria keep evaluators from seeing unexpected results, degrees of success, or how valuable the goals actually are. In a goal-free approach, needs assessment, as far as evaluation is concerned, takes place after the program and is done by the consumers themselves. Thus, in a goal-free approach, participation of participants in evaluation is a necessity.

According to Vogel (1991), "evaluation must be done in a broad context that invites planners and participants to examine assumptions and goals on a constant basis as well as to assess how the process and content are aiding people and groups in journeying toward their goals” (p. 147). She suggests that evaluation involves a participatory approach that considers “context, content, strategies, and methodologies” (p. 147).

Self-direction and calling. “Self-direction in learning involves the adult's assumption of control over setting educational goals and generating personally meaningful evaluative criteria” (Brookfield, 1986, p. 19). Speaking from an industry perspective, Stenmark (n.d.) recognizes that self-initiated activities tend to be more powerful and allow for more creative work. According to him, the planning and evaluative processes need to be less controlled and left to the initiatives of those working.

Unfortunately, in my experience, churches do not spend much time and energy building self-directed adult learners. We have become too dependent on religious publishing
houses setting our educational goals and handing us criteria by which we are to evaluate our programs of religious education. Even when our churches become disgruntled with a particular curriculum, their answer is to look for another external source for educational goals and evaluative criteria rather than looking to the participants themselves. It seems that they are blinded to the resources that reside among those with a sense of calling to teach.

Collins (1991) decried a similar situation in the field of adult education as he spoke against what he calls the “cult of efficiency,” “a growing, and seductive, tendency to make more and more areas of human endeavour (the practical, moral, and political projects of everyday life) amenable to measurement and techno-bureaucratic control according to what is invoked as scientific approach” (p. 2). He calls on educators to look on their teaching as a vocation that commits them to go beyond the tightly controlled definitions and methodologies of standard practice.

Respect, according to Brookfield (1986), is at the core of an adult teaching-learning process in which there is a "continual negotiation of objectives, methods, and evaluative criteria" (p. 3). It is respect that encourages participation and makes learning possible. Brookfield points out that there is still room for criticism in adult education, but good practice has an underlying focus of building the learner's sense of self-worth. He goes on to say that collaboration and respect are the elements that separate adult education from education of children.

This same respect is needed in an organization in dealing with someone's sense of calling. There needs to be a continual interchange of expectations between the organization and the one called just as there needs to be between the educational organization and the learner in the planning and evaluation processes. Experimentation and questioning are an
important part of understanding calling according to Smith (1999). An atmosphere where that can be done without fear of reprisal can be critical to discernment according to Palmer (2000). He illustrates the importance of collaboration in the discernment of calling in the following description of his own religious community’s practice:

> Vexed as I was about vocation, I was quite certain that this was the job for me. So as is the custom in the Quaker community, I called on half a dozen trusted friends to help me discern my vocation by means of a “clearness committee,” a process in which the group refrains from giving you advice but spends three hours asking you honest, open questions to help you discover your own inner truth (p. 44).

Preconceived roles for people are purposely suspended in Palmer’s community as they collaboratively seek understanding of an individual’s calling.

Wimberly (1994), speaking from an Afro-American perspective finds the same need for support when she relates, “Not every person comes to Christian education with notions of what the word *vocation* means. Often, it is in dialogue and storytelling that its meaning for them takes shape. Moreover, they may only begin to personalize its meaning when helpful questions are asked” (p. 29).

*Adult Education Organization Literature*

Collaboration and respect in the planning process seem helpful in investigation of personal calling. However, there are few examples of this type of collaboration being built into the organizational structures of churches, but those that do exist can be quite influential. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, Church of the Savior of Washington, D.C. began structuring itself around helping members discover and respond to individual senses of
calling. Vocation was elevated in this church as the centerpiece of organization. Part of the process of discovering calling came to include sharing it with a close group of friends first, and then with the larger congregation. As painful as it was to put one’s sense of calling to the inspection of others who might criticize it, members found the input invaluable in coming to a clearer understanding of what it was they were called to do. Members often found themselves uncomfortable about supporting a new ministry on the basis of one’s or a group’s conviction of calling; however, the respect and the collaborative process allowed them to move ahead to start hundreds of mission groups, the basic organizational unit of the church (O’Conner, 1995).

Similar decisions about organization goals and structures were later made at Saddleback Community Church in California. Pastor Rick Warren (1995) encourages a system of religious education that leads to an understanding of personal ministry. Members are encouraged to share that understanding with the congregation through processes designed to elicit church support, both monetary and non-monetary. Sub-organizations are started as needed when members’ callings turn into larger ministries that involve still other members. Church of the Savior and Saddleback Community Church have shown that organizations based on calling can be successful, but only a relatively few churches have adopted the concept. The success of these two churches, however, has spawned an interest in developing and adapting some of their principles elsewhere.

The flexible organization of these two influential churches is the result of educational systems that empower individuals to influence organization as they discover their calling. In that regard, it is similar to what many organizational theorists call a “learning organization.” The learning organization is a concept that Senge (1990) calls an invention that has not yet
become an innovation. He compares it to the version of the Wright Brothers’ plane that took flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina in 1903. The plane proved that powered flight was possible, but it was thirty years before it became a practical mode of transportation. At that point, he says, the airplane became an innovation of public transportation. In the same way, the learning organization is an invention of the nineties that shows great promise for organizations, but years of experimentation and refining are necessary before it becomes a true innovation. Currently, it is an idea that may or may not revolutionize the way organizations work.

The most comprehensive work on learning organizations to date comes from Peter Senge in his book, *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), in which he elaborates on five key disciplines that must be in place for a learning organization to exist. The “fifth” discipline is systems thinking. Systems thinking involves thinking in circular, interrelated patterns and knowing that all of the parts of an organization connect to all of the other parts. Systems thinking involves looking at feedback loops. A feedback loop in an organization denotes a reciprocal flow of information. Feedback loops show how a change in one part of the system influences changes in other parts of the system and allows us to diagram these effects. In the previous examples of churches, the calling of individuals is perceived as being connected to the mission of the entire church. It both influences and is influenced by that mission.

Another principle important to the learning organization is personal mastery, the personal growth and learning of individuals who are part of the organization (Senge, 1990). Because an organization is composed of individuals, its learning depends on the learning of individuals. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning, but without it, an organization can never be a learning organization. Senge (1990) points out that personal
mastery is not something that one possesses, but is a process to which one is committed. Included in that process are two sub-processes. The first is a continual clarification of one’s present reality, evaluating one’s present circumstances truthfully and honestly. The second sub-process is continually clarifying what is important. For many, this sub-process requires some digging below the surface and doing the difficult job of evaluating belief systems and reevaluating them continually. It is this deep look into intrinsic desires that gives one purpose and vision, which allows one to determine where he/she wants to be in the future. The churches cited above are purposely leading members to practice both of these sub-processes in coming to a sense of personal calling.

A learning organization is committed to an atmosphere conducive to personal mastery. It is committed to truth in analyzing its current conditions, thus allowing its members to be constructively critical of present practices. It encourages members to initiate change both personally and organizationally, to think for themselves, and communicate freely. Personal mastery is a tool that allows the organization to anticipate needed changes, an inevitable necessity for organizational survival (Senge, 1990).

In Church of the Savior and Saddleback Community Church, the pastors were driven to initiate changes in organizational structure because of a concern that churches were out of touch with their world and headed toward organizational irrelevance. They found that by interfacing the ministry of the church with individual understandings of calling, they were able to build vibrant, cutting-edge ministries, relevant to the culture in which they existed.

Senge (1990) writes that learning organizations need to master dialogue and discussion. He believes that dialogue deals with complex and subtle issues objectively and dispassionately, requiring a deep ‘listening’ to one another and suspending of one’s own
views. For example, the *modus operandi* of an organization contains ingrained patterns of defensiveness that can undermine learning if the defensiveness is not handled and extinguished. If this defensiveness is recognized and discussed creatively, learning can accelerate (Marquat, 1996).

Dialogue is essential when utilizing systems thinking. Otherwise, groups may decide that they would rather smooth over potential problems, practice a winner take all philosophy, or get into a group think mode where people lose their individual perspectives and go along with the way the majority in the group are thinking. Bohm stated in *The Special Theory of Relativity* (1996) that dialogues do not seek agreement, but a better grasp of complex issues. When consensus has to be reached, dialogue makes participants more sensitive to one another’s viewpoints. According to Senge (1990), balancing decision-making with mutual understanding born in dialogue is important for coming up with new courses of action. Calling could be that individual distinctive in an organization around which productive dialogue could take place.

Churches tend to be traditional organizations. Below is a table adapted from Peter Lassey (1998) that contrasts learning organizations with more traditional organizations.

**Table 1.** Comparison of learning organizations and traditional organizations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Organization</th>
<th>Traditional Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learns from mistakes</td>
<td>Punishes mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapts working practices</td>
<td>Operates traditional working practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trains employees</td>
<td>Sends employees on training courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes risks</td>
<td>Plays safe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers coach and develop staff</td>
<td>Managers monitor and supervise staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages experimentation</td>
<td>Discourages experimentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devolution of power</td>
<td>Command and control management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routine reviews of activities</td>
<td>Reviews instigated after disasters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages staff suggestions</td>
<td>Discourages staff suggestions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisions based on empirical data</td>
<td>Decisions based on management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is across departmental boundaries</td>
<td>Work is within departmental boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages questioning from work force</td>
<td>Discourages questioning from work force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning is seen as developing the organization</td>
<td>Learning is seen as developing the individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entire work force is seen as the source of new ideas</td>
<td>Management is seen as the source of new ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning is for everyone</td>
<td>Learning is for beginners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff is viewed as resource</td>
<td>Staff is viewed as cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners are viewed as co-creative</td>
<td>Learners seen as recipients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Lack of trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational memory</td>
<td>Individual memory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While learning organizations are still evolving and the concept is being refined, the definition of learning organization is apt to change. However, the above mentioned churches and others that are following their examples are attempting to move toward the learning organizational model. An understanding of individual calling initiates organizational change in these two churches as learning does in the learning organization. The learning organization concept can help us form questions about the organizational system that shapes and is shaped by an individual’s calling to teach.

*Implications for Research*

Sunday school is an enormous provider of adult education that depends on the commitment of lay leaders. Anything that motivates them, including calling, is worthy of investigation from many adult education perspectives. The investigation of the calling of lay teachers in the church is a relatively recent phenomenon in American Christianity (Wagner, 1994). There is very little scientific research in adult Christian education in general (McKenzie & Harton, 2002), and that specifically dedicated to calling is practically non-existent. Calling can be investigated theologically, psychologically, and sociologically;
however, when studying calling in an adult Christian education context, it behooves one to know how it relates to adult education literature.

Although writers have referred to calling and have investigated some similar types of experiences, very little has been written about the actual experience of calling. Motivational theory in teaching/learning produces questions about the nature of calling because it deals with the same questions about why an adult Sunday school teacher does what he/she does. Programming models in adult education and their insistence on participant input in planning and evaluation help the investigator begin looking at the social context in which calling is discovered and carried out. The concept of adult education learning organizations enhances this understanding of context.

This chapter has attempted to point out many ways the phenomenon of calling relates to a broad spectrum of adult education literature. It does not pretend to be all inclusive, nor does it delve deeply as it might into some areas. For example, a great deal of research still needs to be done to compare and contrast motivational theory with the phenomenon of calling.

However, one must remember that calling of lay people is a relatively recent subject of investigation, and further work in defining and describing it needs to take place first. Different writers have addressed calling and the experiences that surround it, but the essence of calling has not been clearly delineated from the collective perspectives of those who experience it. There are certainly connections between calling and motivational theory, but it may be too early to draw conclusions about the relationship. A firmer base of research on calling is needed in order to compare and contrast the two meaningfully. Also, organizational contexts are important to one’s understanding of the role of teacher and one’s
call to that role; however, relating calling to organizational contexts requires a better understanding of how one comes to that sense of calling first. There is much to be done to investigate calling, but it must start at the basic, descriptive level.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this study called for a phenomenological approach with primary data coming from in-depth interviews with people who have experienced calling personally. Transcendental phenomenology, as described by Moustakas (1994), involves a researcher with a high level of personal interest and research participants who provide data to construct textural descriptions of the phenomenon in question. Through the processes of choosing research participants; practicing *epoche*; conducting in-depth interviews; and practicing phenomenological reduction through horizontalizing, imaginative variation, and synthesis; the researcher offers a description of a phenomenon, revealing new knowledge to the existing literature and suggesting kinds of research that might extend knowledge in the topic.

*Choosing Research Participants*

There is a narrower range of sampling strategies in phenomenological research than in other forms of qualitative research because “it is essential that all participants experience the phenomenon being studied” (Creswell, 1998, p. 111). For this research, therefore, the primary criterion for selection of a sample was that research participants had experienced what they believe to be God calling them to a particular task. Other criteria, however, were used in developing the initial list from which I selected participants. These criteria helped to narrow the scope of the research to a manageable size, enhance the chances of rich data collection, and insure access for the research.

My research was limited to research participants who are Christian. Basic assumptions they share include belief in a personal God who interacts with individuals and a conviction that He has their best interests at heart. “Calling” is tied to the will of a beneficent God. Therefore, when I speak of “calling,” I am speaking of it from a religious, and more
specifically, a Christian perspective. I realize that the phenomenon of “calling” in another religion could offer additional insights and would be very interesting for comparative study, but the purpose of my study is to define what it means to a Christian layperson to be called to teach.

Because I am interested in this phenomenon’s impact on lay leaders in adult Sunday school, I limited my choice of research participants to men or women who have had at least two years continuous experience in teaching an adult Sunday school class. The usual process in most Baptist churches for choosing teachers begins with a nominating committee considering all the leadership needs of the church. In regards to Sunday school, the committee constructs or is given a roster of leadership needs based on the projected number of classes needed for the coming year. Their job is to search out people who are gifted and willing to serve in the various areas of Sunday school leadership. More often than not, the committee makes direct contact with potential candidates to serve and obtains an agreement to serve from each. Before the new Sunday school year begins in the Fall, the committee presents its slate of nominees to the church body for election by vote.

Because Baptist churches generally approach teachers on a yearly basis about teaching, someone with two years experience will be likely to have had thought through his/her sense of calling at least twice as he/she considered whether to teach. As it turned out, none of the research participants had less than eight years of experience. I limited my research to lay people also to avoid some of the theological rhetoric that clergy learn in seminary and the shared forms of “calling” stories common in clerical circles.

Another criterion for sampling I used was that research participants were drawn from churches in a single Baptist association in western North Carolina. This criterion addressed
convenience and familiarity issues. As a former Associational Church Development Director in western North Carolina and as an adult Sunday school workshop leader for over sixteen years, I had access to a large pool of adult Sunday school teachers from whom I could draw those who feel that they are called by God to teach. The convenience of interviewing people who live and teach in an area close to the researcher was attractive because it put less strain on an already tight schedule, was less expensive to conduct, and made participant checks of transcripts more reasonable. Furthermore, I was very familiar with the context in which they experienced the phenomenon of calling, a crucial element in interpreting phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 1998).

However, I wrestled with whether to use informants with whom I already have a relationship, as three of my ten informants were. I wrestled with it in the pilot study I conducted prior to this study. On the one hand, familiarity with the interviewer could be a detriment to accurate data. According to Glesne (1999), many qualitative writers believe that friendship biases data selection. Friends also can be tempted to answer according to what they know the interviewer holds to be true. On the other hand, friendship can help establish rapport necessary for the sharing of sensitive, personal stories. I remained cognizant of the pitfalls during the interviewing process in both the pilot and in this study, attempting not to reveal my own beliefs about calling and emphasizing to my participants that there were no right or wrong answers, that it was their perceptions in which I was most interested.

Although friendship was a potential detriment to data, I believe that since I wanted research participants to share intensely personal faith experiences, their familiarity and trust with me as the interviewer would allow them to open up more. The interviews did produce thick descriptions and a mine of rich data. Therefore, I did not avoid friends and
acquaintances in the sampling process. However, I did not use familiarity and friendship as criteria either.

The process for identifying potential research participants included invitations to participate for those who believed that God had shown or otherwise revealed to them that they are to teach adults in Sunday school. Over a two-year period I collected nineteen names with contact information. Some came from people I met in adult Sunday school conferences that I taught. Others came from pastors who recommended teachers in their own churches. Still others came in response to a newsletter article explaining my research after Internal Review Board approval.

From this group of nineteen potential participants, I selected people to contact using a simple random selection process. I put the names in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and used the RAND( ) function to assign a random number for each name. I then sorted the names on the random numbers that were generated. I began at the top of the list and began calling in the order they came in the randomized list.

With each potential participant, I conducted a pre-interview to determine whether he/she met all criteria, was willing to be interviewed, and would help do a check of the transcription of the interview. Since I personally knew some of the potential volunteers, the random selection process kept me from basing my selection on my relationship with them. The primary criterion for determining when to stop interviewing was data saturation. When I began hearing the same things over and over without any substantive additions to the data, I stopped the interviewing process. This occurred after ten interviews.
Practicing *epoche* in Data Collection

Practicing *epoche* is one of the most demanding processes that the phenomenologist encounters. It is not so much a step as it is a philosophical bent that allows the researcher to set aside prior interpretations, judgments, and knowledge about a phenomenon so that interviews and interpretation of the data from those interviews can be approached naively, uninhibited by preconceptions (Moustakas, 1994). One of the first tasks of phenomenology is to understand a phenomenon as it is experienced by another individual (Allen, 1998). In order to do that, it is necessary to get around preconceived definitions that the researcher brings into the interview (Ihde, 1977). Therefore, *epoche* involves the process of identifying and abstaining from the way one usually perceives a particular phenomenon. Such abstinence is paramount in phenomenology (Erricker, 1999; Hay, 1982; Ihde, 1977; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Moustakas, 1994).

Because of my decades of interest in calling and my personal belief system, I have many ideas about what the essence of the phenomenon is, however muddled those ideas are. Though I cannot pretend to rid myself of all bias in collecting and interpreting data from research participants, a couple of methods used in practicing *epoche* were helpful in acknowledging bias so I could deal with it critically. As Allen (1998) so aptly puts it, What is invaluable for the investigator, whether personally a believer or nonbeliever, is a self-critical attitude, a genuine intellectual curiosity, a desire and capacity to empathize with phenomena of the other, and capacity to free one's imagination from rigid assumptions and constraints of one's personal stance, and satisfaction derived from grasping the meaning and significance of phenomena of the other. This attitude,
of course, is not sufficient to provide adequate descriptions and interpretations of the irreducibility of the sacred. The scholar, whether personally a believer or nonbeliever, must also be concerned with methodological procedure, intersubjective checks, and means of verifying one's irreducibly religious interpretations. (p. 41)

For this study, I used a colleague, a fellow doctoral student, to interview me in-depth concerning my own sense of calling. I recorded that interview and transcribed it. I also kept a journal of reflections on the nature of calling, including notes on personal biblical reflections on the topic. By recursively going to these data and reflecting on my own perceptions of calling, I identified the essence of my own experience in order to bracket out preconceptions that might interfere with the collection of data from others. In the recursive task of developing questions for the interview, I forced myself to remain cognizant of my own preconceptions so that I could avoid, as much as possible, allowing my biases to affect the interviewing process.

Part of the *epoche* for me was to suspend some positivist views of reality for a period of time as I conducted the research. I am prone to think of reality as existing outside our cognition, but “from the perspective of phenomenology whether the object actually exists or not makes no difference at all” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 50). What matters in phenomenology is “what appears in consciousness” (p. 26). That is the phenomenon under investigation. To come to terms with this essential aspect of phenomenology, I put aside some views of reality to deal openly with the calling experienced by research participants.

Conducting In-depth Interviews

The in-depth interviews for this study made use of an informal interview guide. The guide was composed of open-ended questions framed to help the participant talk about
his/her experience with the phenomenon of calling (See Appendix A). The guide was not intended to influence what the participant shared, but to initiate a comfortable conversation in which the participant “frames and structures the responses. This, in fact, is an assumption fundamental to qualitative research: The participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 108).

I followed several suggestions made by Seidman (1998) in designing the guide for the interview. He argues that phenomenological interviews should reveal the context of the research participants’ experiences, a reconstruction of the experiences, and the reflections of the research participants on the meaning of those experiences to them. These served as guiding principles as I constructed the interview guide. However, Seidman also argues that one should use a three-interview process spread out over one to three weeks in order to get the best results. Moustakas (1994) relates a two-interview study, of which the first interview is twenty minutes and involves clarification of expectations and administrative matters. The second interview is in-depth and aims at gathering phenomenological data. As I considered the inconvenience that Seidman’s design would create for research participants, I decided to opt for a procedure similar to the one related by Moustakas. I contacted each potential participant by phone to explain the purpose of the study, checked that he/she met all criteria, explained the procedures for interviewing and using the data, and, if mutually agreeable, set a time for the first interview. This contact, similar to the short interview related by Moustakas, was recorded as part of an audit trail.

Before the in-depth interview, I covered several things with the participant to put him/her at ease with the interview process and the use of data. First, I explained the purpose
again, emphasizing the potential benefits for churches like his/hers. Second, I explained measures taken to insure confidentiality listed below. Third, I explained that he/she may abstain from answering any question and can end the interview at any time. I also asked research participants to sign a release form stating that they agree to participate, understand the purpose of the study, and allow audio recording and use of their comments in research reports written by the researcher (See Appendix B). I allowed sixty to ninety minutes for each in-depth interview with an option to conduct a second interview of the same length if I believed that additional, significantly rich data could be obtained. All of the interviews fell within the sixty to ninety minute range, but no further formal interviews were needed to obtain data saturation.

Qualitative research assumes multiple realities in the minds of individuals, and may produce more questions than answers; however, researchers are still accountable for insuring the trustworthiness or credibility of their data (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001). Using a member check can enhance trustworthiness. Following the example of Humphrey as cited by Moustakas (1994), I sent or delivered each participant a copy of his/her transcribed interview and asked him/her to carefully examine and make any additions or corrections that needed to be made. Over half of the participants took advantage of this opportunity to write in other data they felt would make the document more representative of their perceptions of calling. I also asked each participant to sign a cover sheet attached to the document (See Appendix C) when he/she was satisfied that the document was an accurate description of his/her experience with the phenomenon of calling.
Confidentiality and Data Management

Confidentiality was maintained by using the following procedures: Interviews were recorded digitally on a Sony IC Recorder. Immediately after the interview I downloaded the digital voice files to the hard disk on my computer. Then two copies of the voice files were made – one on a compact disk and the other on cassette. After copies were made, the files were erased off of the hard disk and the Sony IC recorder. Other copies were kept in a steel lock box until later use. The cassette copies were used by my transcriptionist to transcribe the files to Microsoft Word documents. After checking each transcription for accuracy against the digital voice files, the corresponding cassette was erased. Both the documents and the voice files were kept on a compact disk, locked up when not in use. The transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement (See Appendix D).

Hardcopies of each transcription were made for participants to check. The corrected and signed copies were returned and are now stored under lock and key with the aforementioned compact disk. After making corrections to the documents as suggested by participants, I made a working copy of each interview by assigning aliases to all names, places, and other identifying factors in the interviews. As aliases were assigned, I constructed a key of all aliases for my use as a researcher. This key is kept secure with the original sound files and documents. Only working copies of the transcriptions stay on my hard disk, though I keep copies of them also for backup.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological reduction

I used phenomenological reduction to simplify the transcriptions of in-depth interviews to “a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, the
constituents that comprise the experience in consciousness, from the vantage point of an open self” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Eliade (1959), one of the best known champions of religious phenomenology, calls into question the legitimacy of the reduction process in regards to religious phenomena, partially in reaction to a scientific positivism in the early twentieth century that attempted to reduce religious phenomenon to what could be measured by scientific method (Hay, 1982). However, “Eliade's antireductionism is directed much more at the reduction of religious to nonreligious phenomena than at the reduction of complexity to simplicity” (Allen, 1998, p. 46). Phenomenological reduction is a process of several steps including epoche, horizontalizing, and constructing a complete textural description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

**Epoche.** As stated earlier, *epoche* is a critical practice or state of mind in both data collection and data analysis in phenomenology. The transcriptions of in-depth interviews in this study are recollections of the phenomenon of calling from a number of different informants. As investigator, I attempted to approach those recollections without the limiting effect of my own presuppositions in order to understand the experience of others with the phenomenon of calling from their perspectives.

*Epoche* is not the complete blocking out of my presuppositions in a type of self-imposed “zombiism.” Rather, it is a state of mind brought about by a recursive process that includes observing the data, living with the data as it is presented, reviewing my own thoughts and feelings about the data, and returning to the data again to see it with fresh eyes (Moustakas, 1994). The process required going back and forth between data and self-reflection, requiring time and discipline of self-discovery. It enabled me not to avoid or deny my usual ways of thinking about the phenomenon of calling, but to deal with them so that
they would not overpower the description of the phenomenon and its meaning to others. Erricker (1999), expressing the views of classical phenomenology via Said and Geertz, points out this “necessity of analytically deconstructing one’s own cultural discourse in order to identify inherent and unconscious prejudices” (p. 95).

It is the function of the phenomenologist to describe a phenomenon as it appears, not to explain it (Allen, 1998; Ihde, 1977; Moustakas, 1994). *Epoche* is critical for seeing beyond my own experience with calling to that of others. It is not so much a step in the process of analysis, as it is a pervading mindset I consciously applied to analysis.

*Horizontalizing.* Horizontalizing is the next step of phenomenological reduction. A horizon, as described by Moustakas (1994) is an invariant part of the experience that meets two criteria. First, it contains “a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it” (p. 121). Second, it can be abstracted and labeled. Horizontalizing involves identifying horizons with the criteria above in the text of the transcripts, eliminating statements that do not meet the criteria, and eliminating repetitive statements. What are left are the horizons of the experience, which can be abstracted and labeled for the sake of analysis.

Actually, horizonalizing is phenomenological language for the process of coding used in most of qualitative research. In order to accomplish this horizonalizing, I created a list of codes by which I began coding the transcripts. Each time I read through the transcripts and applied codes, I evaluated and amended the codes as needed to capture as many horizons as possible. I did five major revisions of the list of codes in the recursive process of horizonalizing in addition to minor revisions between the major ones. Each of these lists was
kept in order for me to be able to look back at the evolution of my codes, which I did from time to time as I made other changes.

With a code list in hand, I coded each transcript, modifying my list as needed and keeping a record of additions, deletions, and modifications. Because phenomenological analysis is a recursive qualitative process in which the text of the transcripts continuously speak to and are informed by the horizons, it is necessary not to allow the coding list to limit interpretation. It was, therefore, important to challenge my developing understanding of what the horizons are by checking them against the data and by looking for inconsistencies in the data that would reshape my perceptions of the horizons (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Moustakas, 1994).

*Constructing a complete textural description.* Using the coded data, the next step of analysis was the creation of textural descriptions of individual experiences of the research participants. This step included reflecting on the horizons and determining their relationships with one another. These relationships were the bases for identifying larger themes. The horizons and themes were then recorded as an individual textural description of the essences of the phenomenon for each individual, comprised of a list of direct quotations from the transcripts as evidence (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological reduction then starts with a collection of pre-reflective facts, the statements of people who, in this case, have experienced the phenomenon of calling. Then it methodically moves from that realm of facts to the realm of ideas, key themes derived from careful reflection on the invariant constituents of the experience for each individual.
Synthesis of Ideas

Since I tend to conceptualize ideas in visual images and many of my readers may do the same, I eventually came up with a visual using a data display as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) to help me “see” my data. Construction of the visual was critical for me in the third process of Moustakas’ model, imaginative variation. This process systematically looks at the data from varying viewpoints, making connections between horizons and determining underlying structures of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I recursively drew a schematic, checked it against the textural descriptions, and redrew, placing data in different relative positions in order to “see” the phenomenon from several different perspectives. In fact, I took a couple of what I thought were my best diagrams and cut them into constituent parts. Then I put them on a desk top and moved the pieces around to see the horizons in different relative positions to one another.

The last process of synthesis also relied heavily on the model of Moustakas (1994). As stated earlier, Eliade was opposed to the reduction of religious phenomena, but the context in which he wrote was a scholarly world which was aggressively empirical. Even religious phenomena were being reduced to things that could be scientifically measured (Allen, 1998). No such reduction was ever proposed in this study.

Moustakas (1994) defines this synthesis as “the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (p. 100). It is strictly a qualitative process that allows the reader to focus on essences of the phenomenon under investigation. The product of this process constitutes the bulk of my report of findings in Chapter Four.
Presentation of Findings

The findings are presented as part of a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements in the doctoral program in Adult Education at North Carolina State University. Beyond this presentation are plans to develop workshops and/or conferences for the churches I serve and to other churches as requested. There are also plans to use the findings to write several articles in religious studies journals and in lay magazines published by the denomination in which I serve.
Chapter Four: Findings

Description of Research Participants

Using the guidelines established for the selection of research participants, I obtained the willing cooperation of a wonderful group of ten people. Each had a unique story of how he/she understands the calling to teach adult Sunday school.

Although they were all Baptists by design of this study, there was a range of diversity in several demographic categories. The ages of the group ranged from thirty-seven to eighty-three. There were three born in the 1920s, two in the 1930s, three in the 1950s, and two in the 1960s. The group included five men and five women. The level of education attained ranged from high school diploma to Masters degrees. There were two who held Masters degrees, six who held Bachelors degrees, one who held an Associates degree, and one who held a high school diploma. In terms of occupation, three were retired from the workforce, but past and present careers included public education (4), business and accounting (4), engineering (2), homemaking (2), truck driving (1), and auctioneering (1). There are more than ten careers listed here because some of the participants had and have more than one. All but one were Caucasian because of the severely limited number of non-Caucasians in the group from which the sample was drawn, and the one non-Caucasian was Afro-American.

Collectively, the group had approximately 202 years of teaching experience in adult Sunday school. Years of experience ranged from eight to forty. Four had between eight and ten years experience; the rest had twenty or more.

A point of homogeneity that I did not investigate, but that occurred to me later was marital status. All the participants were or had been married. Six of them mentioned an example of spousal support or made a general statement about that support. After finishing
the interviews, I realized and thought it unusual that none of the participants had ever been married more than once, and none had ever been divorced. This is too small of a group to draw any sort of conclusions and it was not the subject of the study, but it would be interesting to investigate the role of a spouse in one’s sense of calling.

What follows is a description of each individual participant that may help the reader put into context statements that are made later in this chapter. I also have included a couple of comments about the conditions of the interview in which I gathered data from each individual. The descriptions are arranged from youngest to oldest participant. Each name is an alias as are all references to places, people, and other identifying factors throughout the presentation of this research.

*Ashley Doddard*

Ashley Doddard is a thirty-seven year old woman who grew up in the Baptist church in which she now serves as an adult teacher. She is an accountant who balances her professional life with motherhood and an active church life. Much of her social life is centered in the church where many of her close friends also attend.

Although she grew up under the influence of a Christian mother, Ashley marks college as the place where she began “reading [her] Bible a lot more, and . . . just spending more time reading and studying the Scripture, and what it meant, and what God really meant.” In the last five years, her spiritual journey has included dealing with the death of her mother and recognizing what she considers to be God’s action in providing peace in that difficult passage. For about eight years, she has been leading a Sunday school class of people close to her age and is convinced that it is something God wants her to do.
The interview took place in the conference room of a local church to which we had access one evening after she finished work. Ashley seemed a little nervous at first, but ended up sharing some pretty intimate details about her spiritual life and her calling.

*Stephanie Michaels*

Stephanie Michaels is an energetic woman who has never been a member of any church except Baptist; however, she says that she has been influenced in the past by Pentacostal Holiness and Methodist churches. Barely forty years old, Stephanie has been teaching adult Sunday school for “about eight years” in a class that she was instrumental in starting that many years before. For her, Sunday school is a setting where people can “connect on a more personal level with [God] and also with others around them.”

She is a mother and has just started a career as an elementary school teacher. She received her teaching degree only one year ago after earning it while holding down odd jobs and rearing a young family. She is now pursuing a Masters degree in reading.

The interview with Stephanie took place in the room where she teaches Sunday school, a relatively large multi-use room located upstairs in the educational wing of her church. She spoke with great enthusiasm about what she believes to be God working in her life and the lives of her Sunday school members. She attributes all good things in her life to God and openly shared how she believes God speaks to her. The details of how she believes God acts in her life were not difficult for her to articulate, but she noted that she does not openly share those details with most people because such conversation would lead others to think she is crazy. Several times during the interview she said something like, “You’re going to think I’m crazy.”
Her understanding of calling is tied closely to the idea that God speaks to people and people can “just know” what God says. She cannot explain how they know, but this, she says, has been her experience.

**Cliff Starbucks**

Cliff Starbucks is a relatively tall, forty-seven year old who owns his own computer consulting business and works out of his home. He and his wife homeschool their children, the oldest of whom started college last fall. With an engineering degree and a Masters of Business Administration, he worked for a major computer firm before starting his own business a few years ago.

He has had a number of significant affiliations with churches and parachurch groups. He joined a Baptist church as a child, but participated in a Methodist church throughout high school. In college, he “rededicated” his life, an action he refers to as “a mountain top experience” that was “strategic” in shaping his life. He became involved with Campus Crusade, a parachurch ministry on the campus where he attended. When he was a young adult out on his own, he and his wife were involved in a new church start in New England where he first started teaching Sunday school. Since then, he has been involved in teaching adults wherever he has gone to church, with both traditional, age-graded classes and a non-traditional multi-generational class.

The interview took place on neutral ground, at the local Baptist associational office. We sequestered ourselves in an unused office and had no interruptions. I had no trouble getting Cliff to talk about his experiences with teaching and calling. He expresses excitement about “talking to people about things that are meaningful to [him] that [he] know[s] are meaningful to them.”
Elwood Nash

Elwood Nash is a forty-nine year old Afro-American who has been teaching adult Sunday school for over eight years. He is the only non-Caucasian in the study. Reared in the town where he now resides, he was an outstanding athlete at the local high school where he now is a respected coach and vocational teacher. A couple of years ago, he also opened up a computer retail and service business.

But life for Elwood has not always been on the “straight and narrow.” In his twenties he became involved in using and selling illegal drugs. He regrets his part in the destruction of lives, but he perceives his experience with drugs to be a connecting point with people he ministers to today. He believes God uses the circumstances of life to shape and mold people to work with Him for good.

Elwood did not really become involved in church until he was in his late thirties. Since that time, he has become a leader in a multi-racial church. His wife of over 20 years is Caucasian, and they have had three children. He credits his wife’s prayers and his grandmother’s early training as two important factors in his moving from an angry young man to one who has answered God’s call to teach in the church. He presently serves as a teacher of the adult Sunday school class in his church.

Jack Parker

Jack Parker is a forty-nine year old engineer who has taught adult Sunday school for a total of eight years, the last five consecutively. He has been involved in many ministries of his church, including various committees, Sunday school general leadership, and a county-wide joint ministry effort involving scores of churches. He is the father of three, his oldest a recent divinity school graduate.
A Baptist his entire life, Jack grew up with a father and mother who taught Sunday school and talked freely about God and His will. His father once shared with him about how God had worked in his own life. His father perceived that God had directed him to give a message to the congregation of which they were a part. Jack, at first wondered how his father became convinced it was from God; now, he says that he has experienced the same thing and understands.

Jack has had several experiences with calling, and there seems to be a consistent pattern in the phenomenon for him. He seems to forecast the tasks that God would have him do. He attributes this forecasting to a “voice” or a strong feeling initiated by God. He thinks about them, prays about them, gets a conviction, and then he sees or creates an opportunity to do the tasks. This process is much like the process his father went through to bring a message to his own church years before.

The interview took place in a conference room at Jack’s church, sitting at a large, round table. He was very talkative and eager to share his experiences.

Betty Smith

Betty Smith is a sixty-six year old widow who has been a member of the same Baptist church since she was married forty-five years ago. Before that, she was active in another Baptist church where she began teaching children when she was only fifteen. She has done numerous jobs in her present church, including choir director. She has taught youth, but for the last two decades she has been teaching in an adult class.

Church and family are intertwined for Betty. She lives alone near the church she attends, on a farm where she and her husband lived and worked for forty years. Her husband was as active in church as she is. Her son, diagnosed with hearing problems early in life,
attended a school for the deaf away from home, and she was instrumental in helping another 
church develop a deaf ministry so that her son would have a place to worship when he came 
home. Though she does not feel very gifted as a teacher, she feels like she “ought to do [her] 
part,” and teaching adults is one of the many ways she feels that God has led her to do her 
part as a Christian.

Betty had a desire to go into full-time Christian ministry early in life, but the 
education necessary to do that was out of reach for her parents. She settled on a 2-year 
business school degree and practiced accounting for years. Today, she and a friend run a 
small business together.

The interview took place in the living room of her house, set on a hill overlooking 
pasturelands that are part of her farm. She spoke a lot about the past and feelings about what 
she does and does not do in response to her faith. Betty’s understanding of her calling seems 
to be centered on feelings. For her, if a task feels right or turns out well, God must be in it. 
Teaching adults, to her, feels right most of the time and produces more than she feels capable 
of producing herself.

**Delores Wilder**

Delores Wilder is a seventy-three year old retired school teacher who has been a 
widow for a couple of years. She was reared out West in a Primitive Baptist background 
without a regular Sunday school, but enjoyed doses of Presbyterianism as a youth at summer 
camp. After marriage, she became a Baptist and has been a member of her present church 
for fifty years.

Armed with a Bachelors degree, Delores started a career as a nurse dietician. 
However, with two school-aged children and a husband who was a principal in public
schools, she went back to school and got a Master’s degree in education so her family could spend summers together. Her secular teaching career included seventeen years teaching home and hospital bound children. She then spent several years teaching physically challenged children.

Delores has been teaching adults in Sunday school for thirty-six consecutive years. The decision to teach was not an easy one for Delores. She said, “No” at first, but felt that she had said no to God. When asked a second time, she said, “It was like a burden lifted off my shoulders . . . when he gave me that second chance and I took it. And it was just a relief to have it settled in my mind that this is it. This is what God wanted me to do.” At that time Delores adopted a discipline of preparation that she practices weekly even today.

The interview took place in Delores’ living room in a small, quaint home in a city neighborhood. She seemed a little nervous, but she explained that she is a worrier by nature. In fact she has had to deal with a mild bipolar disorder most of her adult life, but diagnosed only in the last couple of years.

*Frank Moore*

Frank Moore is a seventy-five year old who has been a member of Baptist churches since he was twelve years old when he “was saved and baptized at Calvary Baptist church in 1940.” It was not long before he started teaching Sunday school. When his high school Sunday school teacher died, his fellow classmates asked and soon elected him to teach their class because of his ability to “talk to anybody.” This was the first of many classes he has taught over the years, but most of his classes have been adult classes. Frank presently serves as coordinator and teacher of a Sunday school class at a local nursing home, a class he “can’t wait” to get to each Sunday morning.
Frank is a high school graduate with “some college Bible classes” he took at night over the years. He and his wife live in a small, comfortable house in Pleasantville since retiring from truck driving about ten years ago and moving back from Atlanta. He is a trained auctioneer and still active in auctions. He and his wife have one child, who lives in the area. There are no grandchildren.

The interview took place on a cold, winter day in the living room of Frank’s house. Secondary roads were icy, and Frank and his wife had stayed in the safety and warmth of their house all that morning after trying to get out of the driveway and sliding on the ice. The living room was filled with baby dolls, a hobby of Frank’s wife. She remained in the room during the interview. She never spoke unless spoken to – a very quiet, even shy, woman. Frank, on the other hand, was very talkative. I felt a sense of pride in his voice as he shared his story of calling. It was sort of like he appreciated his story being passed on.

His conversation about calling focuses on his giftedness and on the fact that the churches he has participated in have sought him out as a teacher. Opportunities to teach seemed to find him shortly after he joined every church he participated in, and there have been many.

Hilda Gill

Hilda Gill has been a Baptist most of her seventy-seven years of life. She was reared in the mountains of East Tennessee. Even as a small child, she showed an interest in discussing the Bible with children and adults alike. She would come home after the preaching services and would mimic the gestures and words of the preacher that she walked four miles to hear every other week.
Her earliest remembrances of church were set in one-room churches in which Sunday school took place in different corners of the church for different age groups. Within a year of joining such a church when she was thirteen or fourteen, she was asked to teach her first class – a group of young people. Her family was relocated in December of 1942 because of the Manhattan Project, and her small church disbanded. But the family soon found another Baptist church and she was again asked to teach. She has remained active in church wherever she has lived ever since and cannot remember a time when she has felt “disconnected” from God.

Hilda graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Psychology and Education in 1952 and went on to complete one and a half years of graduate work out West in 1954-1956. Shortly after, she married a minister and widower with two children to whom they added one of their own. She took on many church jobs that supported her husband’s ministry over the years. She has been teaching adults in Sunday school continuously for a couple of decades now and has served as a substitute teacher for adults since her husband’s health began to deteriorate. Hilda has been a widow for about nine months and continues in her role as a substitute teacher.

The interview took place in the choir room of Hilda’s church. She did not seem to mind the somewhat institutional setting because she was very talkative about her past. Church has always been a part of her life as has seeking God’s guidance in the everyday decisions of life, including whom to marry. However, when it came to teaching, she could not seem to nail down when or where God told her to do it. After the interview, she shared that somehow she has just always known that she would teach in church.
Pat Tyler

With approximately forty years of teaching, Pat Tyler is the most experienced adult Sunday school teacher of all the participants. She “grew up a Methodist,” received her first Bible from her father when she was ten years old, and began reading it as a child, checking off chapters as she read them. She is eighty-three today and still an avid student of the Bible. It was not until she was in her forties with children of her own that she was asked to teach a young adult Sunday school class in the Baptist church where she and her husband are still active. She still teaches “young” ladies in their forties.

Pat’s husband owned and operated a downtown clothing store, and Pat, for the most part, was a stay-at-home mom. She went to college in her mid-forties and graduated with a Bachelors degree in music when she was forty-seven. She went to school because of a passion for music, not necessarily for any professional aspirations. She says her children spent a lot of time at church because of her commitment to teaching Sunday school. She says, “I definitely feel like that’s my calling. It’s what I’ve dedicated my life to.”

The interview took place in Pat’s home in a very comfortable, formal living room, complete with a baby grand piano. She seemed to appreciate the opportunity to share her story of calling and was very articulate. After checking the transcript, Pat requested a copy to preserve her experiences in her family.

Common characteristics

As a qualitative researcher, I was concerned about whether these people would be willing to invest two to four hours out of their very busy lives to assist me in this research. I offered no remuneration or other incentives, only a “thank you” card sent after completing the interviews and appropriate follow-up. However, of the nineteen names of potential
participants, I contacted the first ten in a randomly sorted list. Each one agreed to participate with no reservation. Most seemed anxious to tell their experiences with the phenomenon of calling.

Nearly all of the participants expressed a belief in a personal god who cares for them individually. Ashley describes her God as “very caring, very . . . soothing, . . . Big (laugh).” When asked what she meant by “big,” Ashley responded, “I feel that He is big, because I feel like He wraps His arms around me at times, which is even harder to explain.” Betty agrees and speaks about feeling close to God when she says, “I mean I just feel like I can ask Him, and sometimes it comes on like a light bulb - you know, this is what you ought to do.” Delores sees this personal involvement of God in the circumstances that surrounded her teaching assignments in Sunday school when she says, “God worked it out - the kinds of people that I can relate to and be comfortable around.” When asked to put into words what she thinks God is like, Pat answered, “Well, naturally, I believe that God exists, and I think God is very generous, long suffering entity that cannot be described in words. . . . He is a power, and if I want to see him as a person I look at Jesus, and of course his Holy Spirit is the main thing that keeps the communication going.”

Elwood relates, “God’s going to direct things, so if He directed my circumstances and everything to get me to teach, then while I’m teaching I feel like He’s going to direct what needs to be taught and do what needs to be done in the lives of those who are being taught.” Thus, he perceives God to be personally involved not only in calling but also in the Sunday school classroom. Stephanie relates the same thing when she talks about some unexpected thing that she says in class that seems to profoundly affect one or her class members. She tells that person, “That’s not me up there talking. That is God talking through me.”
Most participants expressed a commitment to disciplines of teaching. For example, Betty shares, “I have really had to work to, you know . . . because it really is not easy for me [to prepare to teach].” Delores says, “I’ve always felt [preparation to teach] as part of the calling. It was the responsibility that I had taken on, and the Lord deserved the very best, you know, so I was serious about it.” While answering the call to teach a senior adult ladies class, Jack adopted the discipline of “reading over basically everything I could get my hands on, praying about it a lot, but I would spend 4 to 6 hours in preparation.” Pat, the most senior participant, relates, “I read everything I can get. Course I ask the Lord to teach me first. I did take advantage of everything I could to learn as much as I could. Not because I felt like I had to, but because I wanted to. I was eager to learn. So I took advantage of every opportunity we had and then during the week, I started preparing, and it’s still a habit I have.” Stephanie talks not only about lesson preparation, but also about regularly inviting people to come to Sunday school. She sums up with words that many, if not all, of the participants could share: “I just worked hard and prayed hard.”

The Phenomenon Described

An Overview

From the interviews, I am realizing that Christian “calling” is a multi-faceted phenomenon. It is not perceived as a single event, but a collection of events that shape the meaning the participants give to the totality of their experiences. For these participants, the “sense of calling” to teach adults comes out of a mixture of events and self-realizations. As they spoke about the phenomenon, their focus shifted back and forth continuously between God’s “speaking,” the world around them, and analyses of themselves. Each affects and shapes the other in a continuous evolution of the participants’ understandings of their calling.
to teach. However, what is born out of those experiences is a conviction shared by all participants that a divine being they know as “God” wants them to teach other adults in Sunday school. This knowledge seems to drive the participants to commit time and energy into a volunteer educational program in which they believe they are impacting the lives of others.

Many participants expressed that how they “know” is very difficult to explain, perhaps impossible to explain to one who has never experienced it. When asked how someone knows God wants him/her to teach, Ashley says, “[T]hat depends a lot on the person. . . . If they have a real close personal relationship with God, then they’re going to know how God speaks to them. If they don’t, then they’re going to have to pray that they will be attuned and be able to see what it is that God’s leading them to. And that’s really hard to explain, to understand.” When asked to explain how she came to realize that she was called, Delores at first replies, “I don’t know if I can explain it.” Stephanie uses similar language: “It’s hard to explain. I don’t know how.”

Others express that it is difficult to explain the phenomenon of calling to someone who lacks an experiential base. When asked whether he could explain what is going on inside of him when God “tells” him something to do, Jack answers, “Well, I realize more and more when you’re talking to somebody who is not a Christian, doesn’t understand, it’s hard to say that. It’s hard; I don’t know.” Later, he goes on to say, “Until you experience it for yourself, it’s hard - you can’t - belief in God and believing God’s telling you to do something, if you don’t believe in God in the first place, you can’t believe somebody else is being told by God to do something. Number one, you have to believe in God.”
Hilda sees the difficulty of explanation as a testament to the great mystery of her God. She compares not being able to explain calling to not being able to answer difficult questions that her son, Charles, asked when he was little. But not being able to answer the questions, while perhaps an obstacle to knowledge, is not an obstacle to understanding what she believes is even more important. She says of that experience with Charles, “I didn’t have the answer, and the reason I didn’t is because I said ‘Honey, if I could tell you why God does things, then I’d be just as great as God,’ . . . and I said ‘Then God couldn’t be God.’ But I said ‘I can’t, cause I’m not. I don’t know all these things.’ I’m still not telling you exactly what you want. I can’t. It’s hard.” So, to Hilda, the mystery of God is part of what makes Him great. One need not worry with explaining the unexplainable.

This research disagrees with Hilda and attempts to describe calling, a “mysterious” phenomenon that is difficult to describe. It does so through phenomenological reduction of several in-depth interviews with people who indicate that they have experienced calling to teach adults in Sunday school. The data reveal several horizons, invariant parts of the experience necessary for understanding the phenomenon of calling. Those horizons are labeled as follows: direct communication, communication via others, divinely orchestrated circumstances, burden over needs of others, gifts/talents, and recognition of personal needs. An extended description of these horizons will follow with textural descriptions of each from the transcripts of participant interviews. However, it might be helpful to first look at how the horizons seem to be related in the experiences of the participants.
Below is an attempt of this researcher to diagram a visual representation of the data collected from participants, a technique suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.** Relationship of horizons in the phenomenon of calling.

In the visual, the six horizons listed above are each linked to the other five horizons with solid lines, illustrating a relationship between them. Each horizon seems to support and seems to be supported by other horizons of the experience of calling. For example, Frank explains that, at first, he was not sure that it was God wanting him to teach when he was first asked to teach as a teenager by his classmates. After circumstances continued to confirm his calling, he became convinced that God had revealed His message to him through others. He says, “I felt that teaching was what God wanted me to do. I couldn’t get away from that. . . . I still have that feeling. And as time went by, doors of opportunity opened and that
convinced me more and more each day.” He also recognizes a special talent that influenced him to believe he was called to teach when he says, “I have never known what stage fright was and I don’t know why. And I study about it a lot; I look back at my school years to my first grade on through. Every operetta we had our school play I was given the leading part. Every one of them.” So, for Frank, three strong elements come together to affirm that he had really heard his God correctly. Each of the elements strengthened the others over time.

The horizons also are in three different columns divided by vertical dotted lines, representing categories of descriptions. The experiences described by participants often shift focus. At times they express their calling in terms of what their God is “saying” to them. For example, Elwood explains, “[O]ne time He told me just to be still, and I didn’t understand that, but that’s what He wanted me to do. He wanted me to stay where I was at.” At other times, they describe experiences in terms of what is going on around them. In fact, Delores offers the following advice on how to determine whether God is calling one to teach: “[W]atch for circumstances around you. And I can’t think for you what kind of circumstances, but you know if the door opens.” Another category of descriptions focuses on perceptions of themselves. Hilda shares, “I feel like if I teach then I’m getting much more out of it, because even though we should study - all of us should study, I feel I need to do more research.” As I analyzed the horizons using imaginative variation as suggested by Moustakas (1994), I began to realize that they could be organized according to these categories, making the job of untangling the horizons a little easier.

Finally, the figure above is divided diagonally to show one other organizing principle for the identified horizons. When I started looking for a description of calling, I was expecting to identify a series of events that led to one’s understanding of calling. However,
descriptions of calling tended to be tied to an awareness of some other force outside themselves or a self-awareness. With this group of participants, that “other” was always interpreted to be a beneficent god to whom they felt personally related. The self-awareness sometimes came about as a “eureka experience.” At other times it was a slowly growing awareness of which the person became cognizant only after a long-time. Calling seems to be more than something that happens to a person to which he/she responds; it is also a process of growing or changing awareness.

Cliff, for example, describes a time when his pastor asked him to teach an adult Sunday school class. Cliff relates, “But what he asked did not mesh with what we sensed was, what was the need in perhaps our lives as well as what we thought would be in others.” He went on to negotiate a different type of teaching position to which he did feel called based on an awareness of his and his family’s personal need to be together in Sunday school, a need he believes was shared by other families. He says of the experience, “I don’t recall anything coming down from on high.” On the other hand, Jack sensed what he perceived as God “telling” him that he would be teaching a class six months before circumstances came together to make it a reality.

The focus of the rest of this chapter is to describe each of the horizons from the collective perspective of the research participants. Although I will describe each horizon in isolation for the sake of clarity, it must be remembered that the horizons exist in the minds of the participants in conjunction with each other. Those horizons are interrelated and sometimes textural descriptions of one bleed over into another and are often difficult to separate.
Direct Communication

I will start with the horizon that is most difficult for participants to describe, but seems to have a profound effect on those who experience it – a direct communication. By “direct communication,” I am referring to thoughts, voices, and strong impressions that the participants attribute to God directly. They are distinct from divinely orchestrated circumstances and communication via others in that participants understand these messages to go through no intermediary process; they are directly from God to them as individuals. Although these messages are interpreted by participants to be supernatural, they do not refer to a voice booming out of the sky or the finger of God writing a message on the side of a mountain. Rather, in the experience of the participants, these messages are generally more subtle.

Use of language metaphors. One difficulty in analyzing this horizon is the adoption of language metaphors to describe it. For example, based on her experience, Betty’s advice to a prospective teacher would be, “[P]ray about it, and pray earnestly, and let God tell you what to do.” Yet when questioned about how, specifically, God “tells” her things, her responses vary. She explains, “[S]ometimes it comes on like a light bulb - you know, this is what you ought to do.” At another juncture she says, “I think sometimes things just fly into your mind. And you know they’re coming from somewheres, and . . . you attribute it to God, because you’ve asked him to help you. . . . [Y]ou just feel like it was Him that was putting all these ideas in your head.” Cliff and others also use language metaphors to describe this horizon. He tells a story of how God spoke particular words to him, but when questioned to describe that speech, he says, “It was in my chest that these words were inaudibly spoken, but those were the words.”
Others freely talk about conversations with God as if God were in a room with them, chatting away. Ashley suggests that successful listening involves, “sitting back and not always doing the talking, which is very hard to do.” When Pat struggled with whether to teach or not, she says, “Anyway, one night I sat on the steps at home and the Lord and I had it out. (laugh) And so He convinced me that I should give it a try, which I did.” However, the conversation metaphor, in these and other instances, refers more to a private encounter in which the participant perceives a message from God in his/her head. Stephanie relates that her conversations are “in my head, not audible to you, but in my head, and you know, at night in my dreams, in my visions, in the morning, it’s like conversation that He will not - He’s relentless. God’s relentless with me; he will not let me go - not nagging – ‘relentless’ is the better word.”

Early in the interview process, I recognized this use of language metaphors so I asked participants to explain what they meant when they used language metaphors such as “God told me” or “I heard God saying.” Many responded first by expressing doubt that such an explanation was possible with phrases like “I don’t know that I can explain it” or “There are some things that your report cannot describe in words.” However, when pushed, their explanations included “feel it in my heart,” “put it on my conscience,” “puts ideas in my mind,” “an inaudible/audible voice,” “an audible voice in my head,” “got a strong feeling,” “something in there that kept urging me on,” “feel like I’ve got a hand across me,” “His voice is in my head,” and other similar phrases. It seems that these Baptists have adopted language metaphors to explain this horizon as sort of a spiritual shorthand. The assumption is that people who have experienced the horizon will understand what they mean, and others may never understand it because it seems impossible to put into adequate words.
**Audible voices.** Four of the ten participants did attest to hearing an audible voice that they attribute to God. Only Stephanie indicated that she heard such a voice more than twice, and she is the only one who mentioned visions and dreams as a way that God communicates with her. When questioned about these, Stephanie describes them as visual images, often cryptic in nature. At first they don’t make sense to her, but later she is able to interpret them in light of changing circumstances. The other three who mentioned an audible voice were surprised by it, but received either direction or peace from what they heard. For example, Jack relates how he heard an audible voice and a firm hand on his shoulder when no one was anywhere near him. The voice told him that he would serve on a committee, which he was later approached to chair. However, the instances of audible voices were rare occurrences for participants who believed they heard them, and they were never related to their sense of calling to teach Sunday school.

**Inaudible communication.** The more common description of the direct communication horizon is an “inaudible communication” that participants attribute to God. It is variously described as a voice in one’s head, a strong feeling, or a thought that pops into one’s head. Often, the distinctions between these categories are blurry. For example, when asked how one understands what God is telling him/her, Ashley explains that “feeling that nudge, feeling that there’s something that you need to be doing and praying and listening” are all important. The feeling and voice metaphors are mixed as they are when Jack says, “Several times in my life God . . ., I’ve felt like told me things. . . . And I felt like for about six months or so God was calling me, telling me that He wanted me to teach a Sunday school class.” Notice that Jack did not say, “I heard God telling me;” he said, “I felt God was telling me.”
Several participants use language that indicates that they had an internal voice that directed them to teach Sunday school. Stephanie, explains what she experienced as “a feeling of anticipation, worry and loss of sleep all rolled up into one. It’s like when you are a child, and it’s two days before Christmas and you can’t sleep. You know something exciting is going to happen.” This heightened anticipation leads to a conversation in her head that “sounds” like “the Lord saying ‘You need to do this.’ ‘Well, what is it you want me to do Lord?’ ‘I think you need to have a new Sunday school class.’ ‘Well, Lord, I’m not ready to teach a new Sunday school.’ And it’s like a conversation I have with Him over a course of sometimes days.”

Thus Stephanie describes the voice as a relentless verbal battle that goes on inside her for weeks, culminating one Sunday “at the altar call. ‘Are you going to answer me? Trust that I’m going to give you the energy. Trust that I’m going to give you the time, and trust that it’s going to work. When are you going to let you go and trust me?’ And so I go to the preacher and I say, ‘I don’t know why I’m down here, but God is asking me to do something, and I’m going to tell him yes.’”

Ashley shares an experience with an inner voice as she struggled with whether to teach her adult class. She says, “I think I could just hear within my conscience - just, you need to do this. This is where you need to be.” When asked what she meant by the word “hear,” she responds, “A voice within me, audible to me, but of course not to anyone else, but it would be like your conscience, and maybe you could relate it to the cartoons where you have the devil on one shoulder and the angel on the other shoulder, and the angel spoke a little louder than the devil.” For her, the conscience is more than just feelings of guilt or remorse; it is an inner place where words are considered.
Strong feelings. There are others who describe this inaudible communication as a very strong feeling that ultimately directs their behavior. For example, Delores often feels that she ought to do things, and she attributes those feelings to God. In her words,

Well, it’s like it’s put on my conscience. That I need to do a certain thing, whether it be write a letter or call somebody, make a visit. Simple things. I’m not talking about really any, you know, earth-shaking things, but just in my little corner of the world something that I feel I need to do. And if I do it, I’m blessed by it, and I realize, you know, that it was a good thing. If I don’t do it, sometimes something will come up like that person passes away and I think . . ., or they’ll move off, and I just have that conviction that you didn’t, you know, “You weren’t obedient. You didn’t do it.” And then I’m sorry that I didn’t take advantage.

By tying obedience and/or disobedience to her response to these feelings, they become more than feelings. They are directives that she attributes to a divine force.

Pat also attributes what she calls “an urging” to a divine force. “It’s something that you just are faced with.” She goes on to say that this urging to teach Sunday school forced her to go through a process of evaluating priorities and the cost of taking on a class. She relates that “once you face those and the urge is still clear, or the sense of it, then you say ‘OK, Lord. We’ll just take a chance on it.’ And we did.”

Betty puts a lot of stock in feelings that she ought to remain in the class she is teaching. When asked how she overcame doubts about her teaching ability and whether she should remain, she says, “There’s something that keeps me in there, you know. I don’t think I’m the best teacher in the world, and I think it’s hard for me, but at the same time, there’s something that’s just making me stay. . . . There’s just a drive in me that says you ought to
stay. . . . I don’t know how you would define it except the fact that you just know that’s what you ought to be doing. It’s just there.”

Cliff attempts an explanation of these feelings of “oughtness” that he experiences in his own sense of calling. When describing what it means when he uses the words “led by the Spirit,” Cliff responds, “Well, . . . the Scripture tells us that the role of the Holy Spirit - one of the roles - is to convict us, and so, therefore, I believe that any human, every human, has the capacity to feel that something is not right.” In Cliff’s theology, the Spirit is part of the Trinity that makes up God. In effect, the Spirit is God, actively working in people today. This feeling of rightness and wrongness, therefore, is seen to be God-induced, a silent communication from Him.

*Divinely induced thoughts.* The last major category of description for the direct communication horizon is one that describes it as divinely induced thoughts. As mentioned earlier, Betty attributes productive thoughts that “fly into” her head as a way that God leads and guides her. Ashley expands the idea to include the possibility “that you could be reading something, and there be a message in there that you’re not even expecting to get, and that might be a subtle way that He’s speaking.” Delores says, “[H]e puts ideas in my mind and that’s the way He talks to me mostly, or Scripture. A lot of times the Scripture just jumps off the page, and it might be something that I have read a lot of different times, but at that particular time, it’s just the thing that He wanted me to know. . . . And that’s how I feel it’s Him, you know, that called me.”

Elwood seems to combine two of the above categories in an interesting story about how God sometimes leads him to Scripture that then instructs him. He says, “A lot of times
when everything is happening and I need insight, He’ll take me to portions of Scripture.”

When asked to explain the words, “He’ll take me,” Elwood explains,

I’ll actually let the Bible fall open to points of emphasis. And people will call that coincidence too, but I don’t look at it like that. But I’ve also been just sitting there praying and ask him, you know, I need some insight, and He’ll just give me a verse, you know Psalms, whatever, Proverbs and that type of thing. . . . I think it’s awesome when He does that, you know. . . . It’s not there because I memorized it, no. But He’ll give me a book, chapter and verse, you know, and I’m going “Wow!”

This experience, for Elwood, is God speaking to him, both through a direct voice and through a reading of the Bible.

In conclusion, the horizon I have identified as direct communication is described in several different ways, from audible voices to very subtle introduction of thoughts into one’s mind. Audible voices were admittedly rare and were not instrumental in the calling to teach among these participants. However, inaudible communications were perceived by the majority of participants in one form or another. Participants described it as a voice perceived within. They also described it as a strong feeling or urge. Some even described it as thought that was given to them from a divine source. What these descriptions have in common is the belief among participants that these experiences are communications from what they believe to be a personal god. Of course, such beliefs can and should be brought into question, but that is not the purpose of this chapter. This chapter focuses on reporting the perceptions of the participants. Chapter Five will deal with some questions that are raised.
Communication via Others

There is a general understanding among the participants that their God “speaks” to people in a host of ways. In addition to the direct communication described above, they also describe experiences of God “speaking through” others. The second horizon, communication via others, is perceived by participants as God’s communication to them being conveyed through the words of those around them. The descriptions of these experiences are much more concrete than those in the first horizon, making much less use of metaphorical language. As in the first horizon, participants see this communication as very personal, not a general type of communication that speaks to everyone, but communication that is aimed at them personally concerning specific situations.

This horizon is related to calling in one of two ways. The first involves the front end of calling in which people approach participants to serve as teachers. The second involves people affirming their sense of calling after they have begun teaching. In both instances, participants interpret the words of others as the medium their God uses to “speak” to them about their calling.

Approached to teach by other people. Sometimes participants were approached by individuals not representing any particular body in their church. Ashley shares, “We’ve always had a teacher and an assistant, and when the teacher resigned, of course, the assistant taught a week or two and approached me, and said that he had been praying and that he felt like the Lord was giving him my name, and that he was wondering if I would be willing to teach. And caught me off guard.” At first she “wondered” about whether God had really given the assistant teacher her name. Her reason for wondering was not a lack of trust in the assistant teacher. She expressed a deep trust in him. Rather, she explains, “I guess at that
time I didn’t feel that I was as capable as some in that class. . . . Several were deacons, and had been deacons or were currently serving as deacons, and uh, a little intimidating at first, you know. Why would He (God) pull me out of the crowd, so to speak?” Ashley struggled with the proposal for a month before she agreed that God did speak through the assistant teacher, and she took the class.

Delores was also approached by an individual, her minister of education, to consider taking her first adult class. Initially, she said no immediately. However, a couple of months later, the minister of education came to her house to ask again. Delores comments on this second meeting,

[F]rom the time I said “no” to him, I felt like I was saying “no” to the Lord, and it was really eating me up. My conscience, you know, that I hadn’t said, “Yes.” And I kept on praying about it, and so when he came back and sat down and talked to me, there wasn’t any doubt in my mind. I mean I was just as clear cut about that this is you know - that he came back a second time and asked me.

So Delores equated the request of the minister of education to the request of God and the second request as a divine “second chance.”

Many experiences related by the participants in this horizon involved being approached by a class or one of its representatives. The relationship they made between God’s “voice” and the request of the class was the same. For example, when Pat remembers her struggle with accepting her first teaching position, she relates the following prayer that she prayed: “Lord I don’t think you would have had me asked if it wasn’t something you wanted me to do.” Frank also states a belief that God was behind the voice of the class that first asked him to teach when he says, “I mean it was a unanimous vote, and I felt like that
God had a hand in it or it would not have happened that way.” Afterwards, Frank taught a lot of classes in a number of different churches as he moved around the country. He was asked to teach in all of them “in a hurry,” a fact which he interprets to be God speaking through other people.

Betty explains that in her experience, nominating committees are often a conduit for God’s message of calling:

[T]he person that’s asking you to do it sometimes is the one who has the calling. They have this feeling that you ought to be the one, and I think God works through them to get to you sometimes. Sometimes you don’t know you can do something, but that Nominating Committee or somebody has talked about it, and they said, “She’d be good at that; let’s ask her.” And I think they have that feeling and then they put it into your heart that you could do it and that’s how sometimes you do it because God is really speaking through them to get to you.

Such was her own experience. She had held a number of positions in church, but had never considered teaching adult Sunday school until her pastor put out a plea for an assistant teacher for a class he was leading. For awhile, no one responded, nor did she until “finally several of them said, ‘Well why don’t you do it?’” She decided to try based on the request of others.

The experience of Elwood and his interpretation of that experience are similar. He has never taken a class unless he was first approached by people in the class. He says, “As far as what led up to it again, it was just like I say I guess God moving on people to see what was in me.” Throughout the interview, Elwood expressed this belief that God often uses other people to “speak” to him.
Words of affirmation through other people. Several participants shared the experience of perceiving God’s “speaking” through others before they took on teaching a class; however, they also related experiences of God using the voices of others to affirm their decisions to teach. This affirmation is also part of calling as they understand it. For example, Frank states that God is affirming his calling to teach when “so many people pat [him] on the back and shake hands with [him] and hug [him] and say [he does] a wonderful job.” Delores also recognizes God in the voices of others when she says, “And then He (God) reinforced it (calling) to me by the fact - even when I did substitute teaching, people were, I don’t mean to sound like I’m bragging, but I mean they were very complimentary about my teaching, and then when I started teaching, it was the same thing.”

When asked when she came to a realization that teaching was something God wanted her to do, Ashley’s answer was “I’m pretty sure that it was around the time that they were beginning to look for the next year’s leaders. . . . [S]everal different couples would come up wanting to know, . . . ‘Have you thought about . . . are you going to continue to teach? We think you’re a doing a good job. We would like for you to continue to teach.’” This, she says, gave her confidence that she was in the right place, doing the right thing.

Stephanie explains that she often reflects on whether her teaching is having any effect, and she prays, asking God whether He is “accomplishing anything through anything that [she’s] doing.” She says that God affirms the efficacy of her teaching “[u]sually through the words of someone else.” Pat also reflects on what makes her teaching effective when she says, “I must have had something because God certainly has been good to me and has been so kind through the people that I’ve been, you know, friends with and have tried to teach.”
Perhaps Elwood expresses a more complete description of this horizon when he describes what goes on in his class:

as far as what God does, He speaks through everybody in that Sunday school class, and I’ve just found that to be awesome, . . . cause I think He brings us all together, to bring a part of the puzzle to the table, and I think that’s where we’ve gotten to in Sunday school. But I feel like understanding that it’s about Him and He’s the one that’s doing it and He’s the one that’s orchestrating it, that helps me know where or what I should be doing in the perspective of it.

In this passage, Elwood expresses a profound sense that God speaks through his class members. These are members who come to him and affirm what he is doing as a teacher. Elwood feels that with their words, God helps him understand the part he is to play in the class.

Divinely Orchestrated Circumstances

The next horizon also focuses on events that participants perceive as divinely initiated, but they do not involve a voice. This horizon, divinely orchestrated circumstances, is described by participants as things in the world around them that their God orchestrated to affirm that they were to teach adults in Sunday school.

A couple of participants used the metaphor of God “opening and closing” doors to describe this aspect of calling. After describing the series of events that led him to teach his first class, Frank says, “And from then on, the door opened.” When asked what that meant, Frank described several situations, one after the other, that led him to other teaching positions. He happened to move to churches that happened to need teachers. He recalls, “I wondered if that was what God wanted me to do. And I said to God, or told Him, I said, ‘If
You want me to teach, You will have to open the door.’” He then stated that God did “open the doors” everywhere he went, creating opportunities for him to teach at every church to which he moved in his life.

Jack also uses the door metaphor when he says, “I believe that if you will allow, God will open doors for you or allow them to be open, and God will help close doors.” He relates several circumstances that made him move from one specific calling to another, circumstances that he believes were divinely orchestrated. He held two major jobs in the church, adult Sunday school teacher and Children’s Bible Drill Director; however, these positions dissolved this past year due to unforeseen circumstances, leading him to believe he was being called to something else. He says, “I felt like when the ladies stepped aside to go to the other class, it was God saying, ‘Jack, I want you doing something else.’ I’m also Bible Drill Director for the church and for the first time in 14 years, there’s no child in this church doing Bible Drill, and I don’t think that’s by coincidence either.” These changing circumstances allowed him to take on a job of coordinating a county-wide ministry involving scores of churches earlier this year.

Elwood sees the circumstances of his life, all the circumstances of his life, as divinely orchestrated. When asked how God let him know he was to teach Sunday school, he replies, “In circumstances, yeah. I think through the different events and the places where He puts you and the people He puts you in contact with and the opportunities He opens up for you. I think all that is part of it.” He mentions that God “directed my circumstances and everything to get me to teach.” Elwood even sees the rough environment in which he was reared to be one that God “chose” for him in order to equip him for teaching in the Sunday school class he now leads. This attention to circumstances in determining calling rises out of a deep
conviction that “God doesn’t send us through anything in life that’s not important for the
kingdom.”

Others, drawing from their own experiences with calling, bring up analyzing
circumstances as a key for a potential Sunday school teacher to understand his/her calling.
Cliff advises, “[G]o back and look and see what’s happening in your life.” Delores says,
“And watch for circumstances around you, and I can’t think for you what kind of
circumstances, but you know if the door opens, and I mean you’ve been asked to teach. Does
the door open for that opportunity to teach?” Stephanie relates an incident in which she did
advise a potential Sunday school teacher to take a close look at other circumstances in his life
before agreeing to take a class.

The idea that God would manipulate the world around someone in order to call
him/her to a particular task at first seems to be very egocentric. To many, it would seem very
arrogant for someone to believe that circumstances are divinely orchestrated for him/her.
However, I found that the participants did not seem arrogant at all. They often made
comments about how unworthy they were to be teaching. They believe God orchestrates
circumstances not only for them, but for everyone, and they see no conflict in that assertion.
They believe that their God is capable of doing far more than anything they can imagine,
even orchestrating the circumstances of every individual on earth. Elwood expresses this
idea when he says, “[E]verything that I see - it’s small compared to who He is and what He’s
capable of doing.” Ashley describes God as “big” and yet able to put His arms around her.
Betty says that God uses people like her who can only “stumble through a lesson.” Hilda
affirms that “God is in control” of all circumstances. Pat believes that “God is [a] very
generous, long suffering entity that cannot be described in words. . . . I don’t try to picture
God. He is a power, and if I want to see him as a person I look at Jesus.” So the idea that God speaks, induces others to speak, and orchestrates circumstances is not nearly as egocentric as it is theocentric, based on their understanding of God.

**Burden Over Needs of Others**

Now we shift our focus from that awareness of the “other” through which the participants perceived God speaking or working to areas of self-awareness that contribute to the sense of their being called. Several of the participants expressed that one of the reasons they felt called to teach was because they felt needs in other adults. There is a sense among participants that they are somehow responsible for meeting some of those needs through their teaching.

Ashley was asked to teach a class whose teacher had joined another church. Although she did not feel that she was qualified, she relates, “I knew at the point that I took up teaching, that the class would probably split or eventually quit coming, and I didn’t want that to happen because of the fellowship we had. . . . I knew that if I didn’t teach, nobody else was stepping up to the plate, and the class may stop coming. And too many good people in it to keep them out.” She goes on to explain that this burden to keep the fellowship going was the primary reason she began considering teaching.

A similar story is told by Betty. She was approached with the plea, “Listen, we need you to teach. We don’t have any teachers in here and we want you to come teach our class.” Betty says she looked around and saw that the church did not have someone else to do it, so she felt a responsibility to meet that need expressed by the members.

Stephanie approached the church leaders about starting a new Sunday school class because she felt that the church was not meeting the needs of new Christians and young
married couples. She says, “I felt like that was an area in our church that we didn’t hit on.
So there was many of the young couples and also the new Christians that were not attending
a Sunday school class.” Stephanie attributes this sense of burden to God when she says, “But
it was just like it was an overwhelming knowing, an overwhelming knowing that there was a
strong need - that people weren’t getting - in that age range - they weren’t connecting with
anybody else, and uh, we were going to lose them - not just to another church, but God was
going to lose them . . . to Him. And His desire not to do that, He channeled that through
me.” So she believes that she felt the burden that God felt over these unmet needs.

For Hilda, the needs of adults in today’s world are primary reasons she teaches. She
says, “Adults with so many cares in life need to be reminded that all through life we must
never neglect ‘so great a salvation,’ and ever be reaching out with God’s love to ALL those
around us. Knowing this, I feel God wants me to be involved - that meaning teaching.” She
cites concern for other people as a primary motivator for any teacher to teach.

*Personal Needs, Interests, & Desires*

The needs of others are not the only needs that are considered in the recognition of
calling for the participants. There are also many personal needs that play a part in their sense
of calling. Sometimes the distinction is hard to make between what needs are personal and
what needs truly are the needs of others. For example, Ashley decided to teach a class in
order to keep “many good people” coming; however, she also states that she did not want the
class to dissolve “because of the fellowship [they] had.” The shared social interests like
“NASCAR” were meaningful and fun for her. Needs were sometimes expressed as the needs
of others. However, they were also expressed as personal interests and desires that teaching
somehow meets for them.
A hybrid horizon. However, before delving into those, one should look at an interesting hybrid horizon that lies between burden over needs of others and personal needs, interests, and desires. There are probably other hybrids that exist between other pairs or even triplets of the identified horizons, but this one is especially pronounced. This hybrid manifests itself in the urge to pass on meaningful things that have met personal needs to others whom participants believe to have similar needs. Cliff and Hilda both verbalized this urge succinctly although others alluded to it in more subtle ways.

Cliff states that teaching adult Sunday school is a “natural extension” of his relationship with his God. When asked what he means by “natural extension,” he explains, “If God is pouring into your heart, it’s going to come out. . . . You want the world to know.” He suggests this concept as a basis for one’s determining his/her call to teach Sunday school when he says,

if God is doing something in your heart, then He is also wanting to do something through your heart in the hearts of others. Probably if the Lord is not doing something in your heart, . . . He is not going to be able to work through you in others.

You are really not where you need to be. But if the Lord is ministering to you in your own heart, then by definition, you’ve got the Good News to share.

Cliff’s statement reveals the perception that God is ministering to or meeting his personal needs and that because of that Cliff has a desire to meet those same needs in others.

Hilda sees this urge to pass on blessings as the primary reason she teaches. She cannot remember specific people that approached her or any sort of divine voice, but she says she teaches because she “want[s] everybody to realize that all of these gifts are so wonderful that God has given us for He knows all our needs, both physical and spiritual.” One of the
tests she suggests for people considering a calling to teach is for them to assess how important Bible study and prayer are to them. “Does it mean so much that they can’t keep it to themselves?” To Hilda, calling can be summed up as “a compulsion that you want to share with other people.”

Recognition of personal needs, interests, and desires. Many of the participants recognized needs or interests in their own lives that contributed to their understanding of their calling. Before she considered starting and teaching a new adult Sunday school class, Stephanie shares that “[she] didn’t feel like [she] was being fed by the Sunday school cluster that [she] was in, by the group [she] was in.” That feeling that her needs were not being met was part of what led her to approach church leadership initially about starting a new class.

For Cliff, the unmet need was family members relating to one another in Sunday school. For years, he and his wife had taught in different areas of Sunday school, and he never saw his children during Sunday school either. He believed there were others who experienced the same separation and had a need to study with their families. He says, “The pastor asked me to teach their Adult Sunday school. I prayed about it, . . . and my wife and I prayed about it, and I said ‘Pastor, I don’t feel led to be teaching Adult Sunday school, but what I do feel being led is to teach family Sunday school.’ And he said ‘Well, what’s that?’ And I said, ‘I don’t know, but let me tell you what I think it is.’” He went on to start a multi-generational Sunday school class that he taught for three years.

Delores advises those who are considering calling to analyze their family’s needs before accepting a class as Cliff did. She says it “might not be God’s timing for you to neglect your family to look after somebody else’s or, you know, a class.” However, in her
own experience, a break from the family was what she needed, and that shaped her sense of
calling. She shares,

[T]hey asked me to work with younger children when my boys were that age . . . .

And I was shut up with those two boys all day long - which I could handle that, but
then to go out on Sunday; I just felt like I needed to be fed. . . . But then when it
came to the adults, it was a different story, because I was learning so much myself,
being fed myself, just trying to keep up with that age, that type of adult. As I said,
they knew the Bible, and so it was a blessing for me.

Hilda expresses a different need that is met by teaching, one that is instrumental in
her own willingness to teach. Reminiscing on her childhood she shares, “I had always been
interested in Bible discussions and stories.” She also likes to read, and she consumes a lot of
material every week as she prepares to teach. She says, “I feel like if I teach then I’m getting
much more out of it, because even though we should study - all of us should study, I feel I
need to do more research. I like to read.” So, for her, the need to get more out of her study
time is met by teaching, and she gets to do it by doing something she is interested in doing.

**Peace of mind.** Part of the phenomenon of calling for several of the participants was
a feeling of peace, which met a perceived need for a mental and/or spiritual homoeostasis.
According to Betty, calling is “a peace of mind or something that you get” when making a
decision. Her advice to potential teachers is to “[j]ust pray about it every day, and until you
feel a peace in your heart that this is what God wants you to do . . . . And I think you will.”
To Betty, “peace” seems to mean “feeling good” about what one is doing.

Others described it a little more precisely to mean an absence of worry or questions
about one’s teaching. Delores was diagnosed with a bipolar disorder just in the last few
years, but she says as she looks back at her life, she recognizes that symptoms were present long before the diagnosis. However, she says she has a peace about teaching. When asked to explain peace, she says, “The calmness, you know, I have a calmness in my spirit about it, and I just don’t worry. I am a worrier. I’m a worrier. . . . To me it means lack of worry, and I don’t worry. . . about teaching.”

Stephanie explains the peace that came to her when she finally agreed to the “relentless” nature of her conversations with God described above. She says, “The relentlessness of God in my head is no longer there. [I]t’s like . . . when you’ve struggled with something. Maybe you’re trying to . . . cook a big meal or something for somebody or for your family, and you’re busily trying to get that done and it’s accomplished; you go ‘I can relax now.’ That’s kind of like the peace.” So the peace comes when she feels like she is no longer fighting what she believes to be the wishes of God.

Elwood adds a theological perspective to “peace.” To him, having a peace about teaching means he can do it without worrying about all of the details.

I guess that’s part of the peace - not having to know all the answers. I get some of them answered. I get enough of them answered to give me, you know, a desire to keep moving in that direction, but I don’t get them all answered, and I can go back and equate that to my wife and myself. I mean I’ve had a lot of questions answered about her, but I still don’t know her. . . . But I’ve had enough of the unknowns answered about her to where I feel at peace about me and her and where we’re going and what we’re trying to do.

In his own calling to teach, he explains the process he went through to come to a peace about it: “I pray about a decision and I get a clear – well, no, I won’t say clear . . . - not so many
questions about it. I mean anybody’s going to have questions about it, but when my questions are minimal then I know it’s something that I’m ready to move on.” So for him, it is not an absence of questions, but an absence of conflict over unanswered questions.

Joy. Words that participants use often to describe why they teach are “joy” and “enjoy.” It seems that they derive great satisfaction from their calling, seeing it as a means of making a difference in people’s lives. Before taking on the task of teaching, Ashley was looking for something she could enjoy doing in the church. After the initial uneasiness of standing in front of a group that she says knew more than she, she became “more comfortable,” implying that she did enjoy it. She also felt like she was contributing more to her class and church.

Others were more direct in talking about the joy of teaching. Frank says, “I am so happy doing it. It’s very satisfying.” Elwood says, “I enjoy it.” Delores elaborates on that joy and attributes that joy to God when she says, “It just gives me great joy to teach a class and you know, to be there, in their presence, and a joy to prepare the lesson. I have great satisfaction and enjoyment in preparing a lesson. And so, that is a reward, I think when you feel called. God doesn’t just put it off on you and leave you dangling. He blesses you with that sense of joy and peace about it.” Whether this joy that participants express is a by-product of calling or part of the mix of things that make up calling is hard to tell. To me, it seems to indicate that desires are being fulfilled.

Some of the participants expressed joy beyond just a good feeling. They expressed an eagerness and excitement about teaching. Delores talks about “[t]he eagerness of doing it. That this is something - this is a part of my life. . . . I know as long as I’m able to get up and go and my vision lets me read and study, then I’m going to do it. I want to.” Elwood echoes
the sentiment when he says, “When I think about teaching, I get excited. When I think about learning something that really interests me, I get excited. And the Bible is something that I’m interested in. It’s no longer just a story to me; it’s a lifestyle, you know.” Perhaps Frank, however, sums up the personal joy of teaching best with the simple words, “I can’t wait on Sunday mornings to get over there.”

**Gifts/Talents**

The last horizon of calling is called gifts/talents and refers to the abilities participants have that are useful in fulfilling their roles as teachers. I join the two words “gifts” and “talents” together because different groups use different words. Now there is a theological distinction between gifts and talents, but for the purpose of this study, no such distinction was made by the researcher for fear of unduly swaying the thinking of the participants. Only one participant made any distinction between the two, and his distinction was blurry in his own experience. In this study, they are treated synonymously.

*Gifts considered at the “front end” of calling.* Three participants mentioned considering gifts/talents that they possessed before they ever started teaching. These abilities were part of the mix that convinced them that God was calling them. Cliff says, “I think that there is . . . probably a set of gifts . . . . I think there is a combination of things that come about for someone to be comfortable, and part of it is feeling comfortable in front of people, right? Being confident is another factor - many people will shy away from teaching if they feel like they don’t have a good grasp on things.” These are gifts/talents that Cliff goes on to recognize in himself.

Frank’s sense of calling seems to rest heavily on what he considers a mysterious ability to talk in front of people: “I have never known what stage fright was and I don’t
know why. And I study about it a lot; I look back at my school years to my first grade on through. Every operetta we had our school play I was given the leading part. Every one of them . . . . “ He also says, “I’ve always been blessed - People are amazed now - with a memory like an elephant, but of course, I’m at the age I can tell that a little of it is beginning to fade. That is nature. But I’ve still got a good memory.” Although he is very hesitant about questioning anyone else’s calling, he recounts, “I’ve known some people . . . in my lifetime that could not say one thing in front of a crowd - I’m talking about teachers. They were put in as a teacher - they would teach a Sunday or two, and you would never see ‘em no more. They just couldn’t grasp it.” So for Frank, a consideration of calling should include a consideration of gifts/talents to be in front of people.

*Lack of consensus about relative importance.* However, there is no consensus among participants about what gifts/talents are important to teaching. Hilda shared the talent of discussing the Bible with others, and even shares that during childhood games with her brothers and sisters, “I was always the preacher. The boys never were. And nobody questioned it. Everybody knew that I was going to be the preacher.” Stephanie, on the other hand, shares an ability to “look at a person and tell you if that person is having a good day or a bad day.” Pat says, “my faculties for memory and things like that have diminished considerably. But I still have the love for people and for the people God gives me. And I love His word.”

*Gifts/talents as a filter for calling.* Delores recounts an episode in which an evaluation of her gifts/talents helped her determine what her calling was not. She was once asked to teach children and she flatly said, “No.” She explains, “I don’t think there’s any
way God could call me to teach young children because I love children one on one, but they drive me crazy . . . (laugh) as a group.”

Elwood states, “I feel like you need to examine yourself there to see what weaknesses you have and what strengths you have, and if you’ve got more strengths than you do weaknesses, then I think it could be applicable - you could teach somebody something.” Always the theologian, Elwood offers the following biblical basis for his feeling about gifts/talents:

[W]hen Jesus went to look for the people to help Him, He didn’t go find someone just to fill a spot. He got particular people that were already working, doing things that could assist them, you know. Take, for instance, fisherman. They understand the rough seas; they understand hard work; they understand tenacity and staying after it if you want to get what you want. . . . And you know I think those people were chosen based on a lot of those attributes that they already had.

However, in his own calling to teach, Elwood distinguishes between his own “worldly talent” and that which God had “instilled in [him] spiritually.” At first glance, there seems to be a contradiction, but Elwood’s interpretation of “spiritually” includes anything God does through natural or supernatural means.

Feeling of inadequacy about gifts/talents. Several participants felt incompetent and devoid of gifts/talents as they first considered the call to teach. Ashley says that when she first agreed to take the class, she knew there were “people that I felt knew the Bible a lot better than I did, and could probably teach even better than I felt like I would be able to.” Betty says of her first experience with teaching adults, “I taught an adult class, and I really wasn’t qualified to do that.” Pat tells of her struggle: “I never was active in any teaching
capacity until this was given to me or asked of me. And as I said, I cried and fought over it and argued with the Lord and everything else, because I didn’t know anything.”

But the lack of gifts/talents for teaching is not deemed a major obstacle by most of the participants. Ashley states, “[I]f God is calling them, and truly calling them, and they are truly willing to answer that call, He will give them the ability. And He has done it for me in numerous situations.” Betty suggests that she did not even know what some of her gifts/talents were until she tried new things. She says, “God wants you to try different things, I think. You know, I think you have to try things to know where your talents lay - where you need to punch in. . . .”

A couple of statements made by participants seem to suggest that a particular set of gifts/talents is not really necessary for someone to feel called to teach. Sharing out of her own experience, Betty says, “there’s a lot better teachers than I am, but I still feel like I have my own way, and sometimes maybe, maybe a polished teacher couldn’t get to the people as well as somebody like me who stumbles through it, you know. I think there’s - everybody don’t need the same kind of - what would suit me wouldn’t suit you maybe. And I think that’s why God calls different people.”

Jack makes the strongest objection to using gifts/talents as a determinant of calling. He says, “[R]emember that God doesn’t call the trained or the experienced, but He trains the called. So often people say they can’t teach a Sunday school class because they’ve never taught a Sunday school class, and I contend anybody that can read and can speak can teach a Sunday school class.” However, when he speaks of his own sense of calling to teach an elderly ladies’ class, he felt their declining health created a need for a teacher with a different set of skills than he had.
As a general rule, participants did consider their particular set of gifts/talents in their consideration of calling. They mentioned a broad range of gifts/talents that were helpful in their own roles as teachers; however, only three of the ten placed much significance on their gifts in their initial understanding of calling.

*A Systemic Understanding of Calling*

In order to introduce the horizons of the phenomenon of calling, I have introduced each separately in the words of the participants. However, the phenomenon of calling is more than a collection or sequence of separate elements. Rather, data suggest it is an interactive system of different experiences in two or more, usually more, of the horizons described above. Although I have listed the horizons in an order because of the linear nature of this report, I am not suggesting that one horizon is any more important than another in a person’s understanding of calling, nor am I suggesting a certain sequence in which these horizons are experienced by the participants. Although common horizons exist in the phenomenon of calling, different participants placed varying degrees of importance on each horizon, and the sequence in which they dealt with different horizons also varied.

Frank is an illustration of someone who considers a triad of horizons in his initial understanding of his calling to teach. He was aware of his own gifts/talents that enabled him to “talk to anybody.” He was approached by significant others that he believes communicated God’s will for him to teach. He also believes circumstances were divinely orchestrated to give him the opportunity to teach. Each affirmed the other, and all three seem to have an important bearing on his initial and subsequent understandings of calling.

Stephanie’s initial understanding of her call to teach also was formed by a triad of horizons, albeit different ones than the ones Frank considered. She sensed a burden over the
needs of “new Christians and young married” couples that her church was not meeting. She felt that her own needs were not being met in her own Sunday school class. And she heard a persistent voice in her head that she attributes to God, telling her to start a new class to meet those needs she sensed.

Although her experience was different from Frank’s, it is not unrelated to it. As she began to teach and only one person showed up for a long time, she began to question whether she had interpreted her calling correctly. She remembered sharing with a friend, “I don’t know what to do. I feel like the Lord has led me to start this class in our church, and I’m not getting much response.” And her friend replied, “Well maybe you just need to let yourself go a little bit more, and God will answer and he will provide - the people - it will come around.” Stephanie stuck to her sense of calling because she believed God spoke through that friend’s voice to encourage her. Stephanie also began to notice how abilities she did not know she had just seemed to manifest themselves in her teaching, abilities that surprised her and her husband. Therefore, two of the horizons that formed Frank’s initial understanding of calling were points of affirmation of Stephanie’s understanding.

Most of the participants mentioned communication via others as an important horizon in their initial understanding of their call to teach adults. Ashley had a friend approach her who “felt like the Lord was giving him [her] name.” Cliff, Delores, and Betty were approached with a challenge from their ministers. Elwood and Frank were asked to teach by the classes in which they participated. Their initial investigation of calling was spurred by this communication via others. For them, it was at least part of the mix that made up their entry point.
Jack and Stephanie, on the other hand, were so strongly influenced by other horizons, that they made the initial contact. Jack experienced the direct communication horizon for six months, experiencing inaudible words telling him to teach a class that already had a teacher. When that teacher moved out of town, Jack interpreted that as a divinely orchestrated circumstance, and the conviction that he needed to teach that class grew too strong for him to wait on a committee to contact him, his usual practice in matters of calling. Instead, he went to the assistant teacher and said, “Maddie, is there a possibility of maybe teaching in your class for one Sunday?” That started a five-year teaching ministry in that class. Stephanie entered into her understanding of calling through a burden over the needs of others, a sense of her own need, and a divine “voice” that kept bothering her. She also did not wait to be approached, but went to the church leadership and communicated her sense of calling to them.

There is an interrelationship among the horizons of calling. The entry point into an understanding of calling is different for different participants, but all mentioned at least four of the horizons in their present understanding. Figure 1 is a good illustration to see how I have organized horizons according to certain aspects of calling, but it may not illustrate this idea of entry and affirmation points well. The following three-dimensional model is really more appropriate.
From the outside of such an object, one may see two or three horizons clearly, but not all of the horizons. From the inside of the model, it is easier to consider all the horizons. The participants described their initial understanding of calling from the outside, from a vantage point of two or three of the horizons. This was their entry point. After coming to an understanding of calling as they gathered teaching experience, their understanding of other horizons grew.

In this model, every surface represents a combination of three or four horizons of the phenomenon of calling. An entry point into an understanding of calling may take place at the point, at a single horizon. However, the entry point may also be along a line between two horizons. There is also the possibility of entry on one of the surfaces between three or four points. That entry may be closer to one horizon than the others, illustrating a predominant horizon in one’s initial understanding of calling, or it may be in the center, illustrating an equal influence of several horizons on the initial understanding. However, once inside an understanding of calling, one can continue to investigate other horizons that will affirm,
disaffirm, and otherwise shape his/her understanding. There is no right or wrong entry point, and not everyone will expand his/her understanding beyond a one or two dimensional understanding, but the participants in this study seemed to grasp different dimensions of their own understanding, some more than others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, from the perspective of ten participants who share a common conviction that they teach in response to the call of a personal and beneficent divinity, the phenomenon of calling is a multifaceted mental construct. It involves participants’ changing awareness of themselves and of the “other,” whom they believe to be God. It includes experiences they believe to be God “speaking,” experiences with the world surrounding them, and personal reflections. The primary horizons of this mental construct are direct communication; communication via others; divinely orchestrated circumstances; burden over needs of others; gifts/talents; and personal needs, interests, and desires. These horizons are interrelated and continuously influence how participants understand other horizons and their calling to teach adult Sunday school.
Chapter 5: Summary and Implications

Summaries

The Choice of Process

This research project began over twenty-five years ago as an effort to understand an experience in my own life, an experience which left me with a direction, but little understanding of the process that gave me that direction. Since that time, I have studied the theological underpinnings of calling, counseled scores of others trying to come to some sense of calling, and read all I could to understand the phenomenon. However, a meaningful description was always difficult to grasp. One reason that I entered doctoral studies in adult education at North Carolina State University was to learn other means to research this phenomenon that has an immense bearing on adult Christian education as I know it.

Early in my studies, I discovered phenomenological research. For me, it was a major breakthrough in how to approach complex phenomena. It provided an established methodology that enabled me to take a look at calling from a whole new perspective. However, it challenged many of my preconceived ideas about the boundaries of legitimate research. Always a believer in quantitative research, I discovered that the methodologies associated with quantitative studies were simply inadequate for investigating something as nebulous and ill-defined as calling. In the popular literature, descriptions of the phenomenon lacked completeness. They never seemed to encompass the experience I had or that others with whom I counseled seemed to have. There was a dearth of research literature on the subject because one cannot investigate something he/she cannot define. Or so I thought.

When I first read in Creswell (1998) that “a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon”
(p. 51), I got excited. To think that there was a methodology that could focus on calling was a welcome revelation. However, I first had to become a student of Moustakas through his book *Phenomenological research methods* (1994), and the lessons did not come easily. I struggled with the philosophical concepts that drive phenomenology. They forced me to suspend my presuppositions about reality and to focus on the internal experience of others rather than something outside of them that was measurable in the scientific sense. I struggled through a pilot study and became convinced that phenomenology was the arena in which I could investigate calling in a way that would be meaningful for me and for others.

*The Findings*

The findings of this research are described in detail in Chapter Four, but let me offer a brief synopsis here. Calling is a multifaceted phenomenon that many of the research participants struggled to explain. Most had never been asked to do so. As a result, their responses were unrehearsed and lacked the coherence of a trained clergy person’s story of calling. However, from the textural descriptions of their collective stories, there arose some invariant themes that repeated themselves over and over again.

These themes, or “horizons” as they are called by Moustakas (1994), seem to belong to one of two broader categories. The first focuses on a divine being as the source of calling. The second focuses on growing self-awareness. In the first category, “direct communication,” “communication via others,” and “divinely orchestrated circumstances” are the labels describing the horizons. “Direct communication” experiences are described by participants as experiences they perceive to be a direct communication from God, manifesting itself as a “voice,” an unanticipated thought, or a strong feeling. Participants describe “communication via others” experiences as God using the voices of others to
communicate with them. “Divinely orchestrated circumstances” experiences are those that participants perceive to be God manipulating their circumstances to communicate a calling to them. All three horizons are based on an assumption of the participants that God is personally involved in their lives. A common term used by participants to describe their ability to perceive calling in the first category is “being in tune” with God.

In the self-awareness category, “burden over needs of others” is a label for that group of experiences in which the participants describe a growing awareness of the needs of others and a conviction that they must be instrumental in meeting those needs. “Personal needs, interests, and desires” are those experiences described by participants in which they realize that teaching satisfies their own personal needs, interests, and/or desires. “Gifts/talents” experiences are those recounted by participants that bring them to recognition of the abilities they possess to teach effectively. A common concept used in explaining “self-awareness” experiences is often described in terms of a “right fit,” that who they are matches up with the expectations they perceive to be on Sunday school teachers.

The distinction between “being in tune” and recognizing a “right fit” is an important one in understanding the complexity of describing the phenomenon of calling. Writers such as Rehm (1990), Jones (1996), and Palmer (2000) tend to emphasize “right fit” as the basis for determining calling. They say little to suggest that one must “be in tune.” On the other hand, Tozer (1948), Barnette (1965), and Blackaby and Blackaby (2002) place primacy on “being in tune” with God. These writers do not necessarily deny the other side; they just emphasize their bases for determining calling so strongly that the other is minimized, sometimes to the point of irrelevance in the understanding of one’s calling. One significant
finding of this study was that research participants clearly articulated experiences of both “being in tune” and “right fit.”

Data from this research indicate that calling is a systemic concept. The experiences that participants had in one horizon affect how they interpret experiences in others. Sometimes an experience in one horizon leads to another, but there is no particular order in which those experiences take place. One may enter into a sense of calling through “burden over needs of others” and later become aware that he/she has “gifts/talents.” Another may get a sense that a divine being is “telling” him/her what to do and then develop a “burden” over the needs of others. Entry points into an understanding of calling vary as does the order in which different horizons of experience occur. One person’s entry point may be simply a point of affirmation for another. Or a particular experience of one person who feels called may not be experienced at all by another who feels called.

To understand these differences between the participants’ experiences with calling, I proposed a model in Chapter Four. It takes into account the collective experiences of the ten

![Diagram](Image)

*Figure 1. Relationship of horizons in the phenomenon of calling.*
participants but allows for the possibility of an understanding of calling even when only partially realized in the experience of an individual. In theory, an individual’s sense of calling may be one dimensional if his/her entire sense of calling is based on a “direct communication.” However, in this study, all of the participants had a multidimensional understanding of his/her calling. For example, in Stephanie’s perceived experience, a “burden” was affirmed by a “direct communication.” Retrospectively, she recognized “orchestrated circumstances” that occurred before the other two but had relevance to her calling only afterwards. After she started teaching, she became aware of “gifts/talents,” thus adding another dimension to her understanding of calling. Therefore, I believe calling is something that evolves as people come to perceive other dimensions of that calling. A one-dimensional understanding can be enough to give one a sense of calling, but other dimensions can add to its richness or even change one’s perception of it.

**Implications**

*For Motivational Theory*

This present research holds some significance for those who wish to understand motivation among religious people. Cultural wars and terrorism have been led by religiously motivated people for centuries; however, with the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 and the global response against terrorism that it engendered, there is a renewed interest in making sense of why religious zealots do what they do in the name of a divinity.

I am not suggesting that the participants of this study are terrorists; nor do I suggest that any particular religious people have terrorist tendencies beyond those of other religious people. However, religious people, even the participants in this study, are motivated by
several things that elude scientific measurement. Wlodkowski (1999) believes the study of intrinsic motivation, especially, must take into account “such influences as religion, myth, ethnicity, and regional and peer group norms” (p. 8). He explains, “By using a multidisciplinary approach to adult learning that includes but is not limited to the social sciences, philosophy, political theory, spiritual studies, and linguistics, we can be more flexible and interpretive; the conceptual framework of intrinsic motivation allows for a synthesis of much of this information” (p. 9). The present study is a phenomenological investigation of why religious people perform the particular task of teaching Adult Sunday school. The data are not likely to solve the problem of terrorism, but they may contribute to understandings in the broader field of motivation in religious education.

The study also provides another vantage point to consider the dichotomy of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. As mentioned earlier in Chapter Two, much modern research distinguishes between the two and attributes the most successful motivation for long-term learning to intrinsic motivation. (Bandura, 1982; Lent et al., 1984). However, in this study, it is often difficult to draw the line between the two.

For example, Ashley reports a voice that told her teaching Sunday school was something she needed. She attributes this inaudible voice to God. Whether one believes a divine being told Ashley something does not change the fact that Ashley believes He did. Thus, in one sense, her experience would seem to be an example of extrinsic motivation, resulting in an effort to please a divinity whom Ashley believes can and will reward her faithfulness. However, the experience pointed out an intrinsic need that she had to meet through teaching. In her mind, is this an example of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation? It is
hard, if not impossible, to distinguish unless one imposes his/her own presuppositions about God into Ashley’s experience.

Kroth and Boverie (2000) describe spiritual sources for life mission as either a summons or a strong inclination. If calling is a summons, it would seem to be a source of extrinsic motivation. If it is an inclination, it would seem to be a source of intrinsic motivation. For Ashley and other participants, calling was generally both. The distinction was blurred, and they saw no contradiction. Whether or not one believes there is a God who is personally involved in the lives of individuals, he/she needs to understand this blurring of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the minds of religious people if he/she is wants to understand what motivates them.

For Religious Education

This research contributes more directly to the field of religious, especially Christian, education. First it adds to a very small pool of scholarly research that has been contributed to this point. Even meager contributions seem significant when the coffers are empty. It also provides a basic tool to inform the teacher recruiting practices of churches today. Finally, it offers a model for considering the evolution of one’s understanding of his/her call to teach adult Sunday school.

As stated in the literature review in Chapter Two, scholarly research in the field of religious education in general is relatively scant (McKenzie & Harton, 2002). However, research in the area of calling, except for theological treatments, is practically non-existent. The one exception I found was a small book by Alice Cullinan entitled Sorting It Out (1999). Although she depends heavily on theology to interpret calling and introduces it in a biblical context, she also uses surveys of ministers and aspiring ministers as part of her data. The
present research differs from Cullinan’s in its phenomenological approach, in its focus on laypeople, and in its presentation of a more concise model. It hopefully will raise additional questions among religious educators upon which other scholarly research in the field of religious education can be built. I will offer a few of the questions that occur to me later in this chapter.

Teacher recruiting practices have been a focus of my professional ministry for eighteen years. Some churches I have worked with consider calling in their equation for recruiting. Many more, however, do not. My observations are nothing new. Furnish (1976) observes, "Since 1935, the literature does not reveal much interest in the process by which teachers are chosen. Directors will deny it vehemently, but perhaps this is evidence that church school teachers really have been recruited on the basis of 'whoever we can get' rather than selected in the light of carefully determined criteria” (p. 59). Jack, one of the participants in this research recognizes the same practice in the churches where he has participated: “I’ve served on nominating committees; I know how sometimes that works . . . . I’ve got a bunch of holes and I’ve got a bunch of pegs and I’ve got to get them in, and I don’t care where they hit. You know, that’s the way, a lot of times, the Nominating Committee goes that I’ve served on - too many times.” So the recruiting process often never considers the calling of those who are being recruited.

However, even those churches who consider calling tend to emphasize only one or two of the horizons that I have identified in the participants’ experiences of calling. For example, many churches use a survey or a “gift inventory” to help members determine their calling. However, the questions are almost exclusively based on “gifts/talents” or “interests.” Other aspects of calling are often ignored in the instruments used in recruiting processes. In
this study, “gifts/talents” was one of the least emphasized of the horizons, especially in the participants’ initial considerations of calling. The present research offers a more comprehensive model upon which recruiting models can be evaluated and improved.

Although there are some churches that show a greater sensitivity to calling as a criterion for recruiting teachers, few tools exist to help their volunteer teachers explore more than one or two dimensions of calling described in this research. Therefore, one hope is that this research can provide a basis for the development of future evaluative instruments to help prospective teachers consider other dimensions of calling.

The model may also be used to broaden current teachers’ awareness of other dimensions of calling that they have not yet considered. Calling, in the experience of the participants, is dynamic. Their understanding of it changes over time and with new experiences. When one horizon of calling changes or another is discovered, other horizons shift and evolve, making it necessary for teachers to constantly reevaluate their calling from several different perspectives.

Rehm (1990) states, "[S]piritual activity in the sense of a calling continually seeks to unify and render coherent what one's life is called to be used for in the world. Since a calling to a special project or work in the common world encompasses the vagaries of conditions and ideas faced over a lifetime, it offers a stabilizing force of understanding to the constant spiritual activity” (pp. 118-119). In other words, when one perceives a sense of calling, he/she makes a commitment to that calling with the realization that situations and conditions will change. Calling is larger than current circumstances. Its draw on the individual is consistent despite the circumstances; therefore, it provides a stability of purpose in life.
However, a one-dimensional view of calling is less likely to provide that stability than a multi-dimensional one. For example, Betty has been teaching an adult class for nearly twenty years. She often wonders why because she believes she lacks the gifts/talents that one needs as a teacher. However, other dimensions of her sense of calling like “communication via others,” “direct communication,” and “divinely orchestrated circumstances” have kept her teaching. She continues to question, but she continues to get affirmation in these other dimensions of her calling.

For Further Research on Calling

The present description of calling presented in this study cries out for additional research. One question raised by this study is to what degree institutional structures shape one’s perception of calling. For example, do the more hierarchical structures of the Roman Catholic Church make Catholic laypeople perceive and describe calling differently than their Southern Baptist counterparts? Or what differences exist between perceptions of calling of Christians who belong to different kinds of churches? Does a church organized around individual members’ senses of calling and one that has a traditional organization affect the way individual members perceive calling?

Yet another question is the influence of individualism on one’s perception of calling. Two dominant theological stances among American Southern Baptists have given them an individualistic worldview. The first is the belief in eternal security, that once one has experienced salvation of the soul, nothing or no one can take it away. This gives adherents the freedom to challenge religious institutions and theological perspectives without fear of eternal reprisals (Barnhart, 1986). The second is the belief that “any believer is competent to approach and deal with God with no need for any intercessor whether it be a church or a
priest” (Cothen, 1993, p. 47). Southern Baptists have historically been “wary of centralization” and “suspicious of creeds” (Watson, 1993, p. 12), and they “have consistently held to a highly individualistic approach to religion” (Yarbrough, 2000, p. 28). “One of the most fundamental dimensions along which cultures differ is their degree of individualism as opposed to collectivism”(Wlodkowski, 1999). Therefore, will this description of calling drawn from the experiences of people in an individualistic church culture and living in a highly individualistic society be relevant at all in a society or a church with a collectivist worldview? Would another Christian, even a Baptist, who held a collectivistic worldview have the same perception that God addresses individuals? Questions about transferability abound, and only further studies conducted in other groups will enable us to begin answering them.

Another question is, “How much is this description anchored in the human condition and how much of it is dictated by a particular religion?” A host of phenomenological studies like this one would have to be conducted with adherents of other religions and with people not affiliated with any religion before a meaningful answer to the question could be attempted.

Another area for research and development is the construction and testing of instruments to help religious educators access and use this model with potential and experienced adult Sunday school teachers. In my own experience, I have often wished such tools were available. Even though there have been tools that I have used, I found them to be rather “flat,” one or two-dimensional.
Conclusion

The quest for an understanding of calling has driven me through decades of professional ministry in churches and through five years in doctoral studies. I do not feel that the quest has ended with this dissertation. In many ways, it is just beginning. I have developed a model based on the perceptions of ten men and women to whom I owe a great deal. Their ideas and experiences have enriched my own and have given me a new start. Now, more than ever, I am committed to continue studying the phenomenon of calling and work alongside others involved in the same quest.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

INTERVIEW GUIDE for “Calling: A Phenomenological Study”

P.I (Principle Investigator): The research I am doing concerns how adult Sunday School teachers come to understand that God wants them to teach Sunday School. The criteria I used when looking for interviewees is that they have at least two years experience teaching adult Sunday School and that they are comfortable with the idea that it was God that wanted them to teach Sunday School. If you meet those criteria, please state your name and that you meet those criteria.

P.I.: In the interest of time and accuracy, I am going to record the interview instead of trying to take notes. This will help me in gathering data. I assure you that anything you say will be assigned to an alias that cannot be tied to you personally.

There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested primarily in your perceptions. You have the right to refrain from answering any question or to end the interview at any time. Thanks for your willingness to meet with me and share some of yourself with me. Let’s get started.

1. How much experience do you have teaching Sunday School?

2. I would like you to take me back to your first class and share with me all the details you can remember about it.
   Possible probes: * Tell me about the members and your relationship with them.  
                    * What was the room like where you taught?  
                    * How did you feel about the experience?  
                    * Why do you think you felt that way?

3. How does your teaching experience in that first class compare with your most recent class?
   Possible probes: * What do you think made it better (or worse)?  
                    * How are the two classes different in the way they perceived you as a teacher?

4. Would you share with me some reasons you teach Sunday School?
   Possible probes: How would you rank those reasons in importance to you?

5. How would you describe yourself as a teacher?

6. Tell me about your relationship with God.
   Possible probes: * When and under what circumstances did you first feel connected with God?  
                    * How do you visualize God? When you think of God, what concrete images come to mind for you?  
                    * If you can recall any, can you tell me about a time when you felt disconnected from God? What makes that time different
from when you understood God wanted you to teach Sunday School?

7. What connection do you see between your relationship with God and your teaching Sunday School?

8. Let’s go back to the very first class you taught. Describe the sequence of events that led you to take the class.
   Possible probes: *Under what circumstances did you become aware that you were wanted to teach? 
   *Who were the key people who influenced you and what did they say to you? 
   *What other things were going on in your life at that time: spiritually, professionally, academically, and physically? 
   *How did you feel when you officially agreed to take the class? *Looking back, what part do you believe God played in that sequence of events?

9. When God wants you to do something, like teaching Sunday School, in what ways does He let you know?
   Possible probes: * Can you tell me about other ways God communicates with you?

10. Give me all the details you can about your experience when you came to understand that God wanted you to teach Sunday School.
    Possible probes: *If there was a specific time, where were you and what were you doing? 
    *If there was not a specific time, tell me about how the understanding evolved?

11. Would you share some specific differences that experience has made in your life?
    Possible probes: *What difference did it make in your relationship to God? 
    *What difference did it make in your relationship to the Church? 
    *What difference did it make in your relationship to significant others? 
    *What difference did it make in your day-to-day routines? 
    *What difference did it make to your belief system?

12. If you were giving advice to a potential Sunday School teacher, what would you tell him/her about how God communicates His will?
Appendix B

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Calling: A phenomenological study

Principal Investigator: Joseph W. Collins
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. John Pettitt

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to define the phenomenon of calling in the lives of Sunday School teachers of adults based on how they experienced it.

INFORMATION

1. A participant must meet the following criteria:
   a. Teaches an adult Sunday School class.
   b. Is a layperson.
   c. Has at least two years of consecutive experience as a teacher of adults.
   d. Teaches in a Baptist church in southwestern North Carolina.
   e. Attests to an experience of calling by God to teaching in Sunday School.
   f. Speaks and understands English.

2. Each participant will participate in one or two in-depth interviews, focusing on his/her experiences with calling.

3. Interviews will be recorded on an audio file and/or a tape recorder. These recordings will be securely stored in the home of the principle investigator.

4. The researcher will transcribe or have transcribed each interview. External transcriptionists will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement before beginning their work.

5. Each participant will review the transcript(s) of his/her interview(s), checking for accuracy and recommending any changes that would make the document(s) more reflective of his/her experience.

6. Aliases will be assigned to all names and identifying factors in the transcripts to insure confidentiality of the participants.

7. Information will be used in a dissertation, and possibly other future research reports and publications.

8. Each interview will require between 60 and 90 minutes of the interviewees undivided attention.

9. Review of each transcript will require approximately one hour.

10. The total time required of each participant could range between 2 hours and 4 hours.

RISKS

The only potential risk I can foresee is interviewees feeling their private spiritual lives are being invaded. However, participants have the freedom to abstain from answering any question.

BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to the participant. However, the potential for indirect benefits exists. As the profession of Christian Education becomes more aware of the experiences of laypeople with the phenomenon of calling, the church of the participant could benefit by helping people find ways to recognize and live out their sense of calling. Thus, the churches of which the participants are a part could be strengthened. The research will also add to a body of knowledge called the phenomenology of religion that serves as a basis for much current work in comparative religion, allowing people of other faiths to understand the participants’ experiences of faith.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records that can be linked directly to the participant will be kept strictly confidential. This data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless the participant specifically gives permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link him/her to the study.
COMPENSATION
For participating in this study participants will receive no compensation.

CONTACT
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Joseph W. Collins, at 1010 Castlewood Drive; Shelby, NC 28150, by e-mail at dulciman@bellsouth.net, or by phone at (704) 484-8414. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Matthew Zingraff, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-1834) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-2148)

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT
I agree to participate in a research study of “Calling: A Phenomenological Study.” I understand the purpose and nature of this study and I am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing an Ed.D. degree, including a dissertation and any other future publication. I understand that participants, including myself, will be quoted and that my name and other names I might use in interviews will be assigned aliases to insure confidentiality as much as is possible. I voluntarily agree to participate in an in-depth interview of 1 to 1½ hours. If necessary, I will be available at a mutually agreed upon time and place for an additional 1 to 1½ hour interview. I also grant permission to audio-record the interview(s) and understand that I will read the transcription of the interview(s) to check for accuracy. I understand that someone other than the researcher may be hired to transcribe the interview and will hear names before they are assigned aliases.

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Subject’s signature_______________________________________ Date _______________

Investigator's signature__________________________________ Date _______________
Appendix C

Cover Sheet for Transcript

I, the undersigned, am satisfied that the following document is an accurate description of my experience with the phenomenon of calling as I currently understand it.

__________________________________   __________________
Signature       Date
Appendix D

Confidentiality Agreement

I, the undersigned, hereby agree to keep confidential all information that I transcribe for the study entitled “Calling: A Phenomenological Study.” I will not reveal any names of people associated with the study or any details of interviews that might identify any interviewee recorded.

_______________________________________________   ____________________  
Signature          Date