



How to recognize the missionary call

Since the missionary call *identifies* who should be missionaries, *confirms* that God has chosen and equipped them for this task, *justifies* the church in setting them apart for this ministry and sending them out, and *provides the strong conviction and commitment* required by missionary work, then this call is a highly important element in the overall task of missions. And if local churches are to participate correctly in this task, they need to be able to recognize whether or not a person shows evidence of having received this missionary call. (For further information, see the articles *What is the Missionary Call?* and *The Role and Importance of the Missionary Call*, found under “Key terms” on the “Missions info” tab of the WMA website.)

The key identifying element

What can we look for as a sign of having received a missionary call? We cannot base our judgment on a particular type of *experience*, because the work and movement of the Holy Spirit can vary greatly from

individual to individual. Then, what kind of *universal* element can we find? We need something that will be detectable in *all* missionary calls.

Fortunately, such an element exists. It is the fact of literally having been captivated by Christ for this task. Experiences may vary from person to person, but *everyone who has been truly called experiences this element of having been captivated for their future ministry*. It is essential to the call, and without it, there is no call (see Ephesians 4:8, 11–12). So, our basic question here should be: *does this person show evidence of having been captivated by Christ for this missionary ministry?* If the answer is positive, it is probable that the person has received a missionary call. If the answer is negative, then it is probable that the person has not received a call (or at least does not show evidence of it).

The process of the call

But what about the people who are in the *process* of discovering their call (a process that could extend

over a number of years)? Perhaps Christ has taken them captive, but they haven't realized it yet (and therefore do not show much evidence). Or perhaps they are just discovering their call, and therefore only show a bit of evidence of having been called. What can we do with this type of person? Fortunately, the large majority of these people seem to pass through a similar *general process* in discovering their calling. And this process, which only has seven main steps or stages, is relatively easy to analyze. Therefore, by analyzing and comparing where a person is in this process, and the degree of commitment they feel toward this ministry, we can predict a *possible* missionary call, and even predict a general *placement* in this whole process of recognizing the call.

Obviously, we dare not seek to treat this as if it were a totally predictable science (like mathematics). We are dealing with individuals and with God's unique working in their lives. So, as we approach this subject, we must *always* remember that God's work in people's lives can vary greatly. Therefore, these seven steps or stages, and the accompanying diagram, should only be applied as a *general* assessment tool. We should never seek to apply them with mathematical precision.

Step 1 – Curiosity

For many, the first noticeable step toward a missionary call begins with the awakening of a curiosity with regard to missions ministry. In this step, some facet of the work captures the attention of this person.

Perhaps for the first time in their life, they begin to take note of this ministry. This awakening may progress quickly or slowly, and it might even be so slow that the person hardly realizes that it is happening. And this curiosity may spring from a great variety of sources (reading a missionary biography, reading a missionary's prayer letter, attending a missionary conference, listening to a missionary sermon, etc.).

Step 2 – Interest

Once a curiosity has been awakened, it leads to an interest in the object that has aroused this curiosity. In this step, the individual begins to *study* and *think about* the area that has attracted their curiosity. Perhaps for the first time in their life, they actually begin to contemplate this ministry. They seek further information, digest it, and perhaps even talk with their friends about it. They may even look up a book on missions or talk with a missionary. Why? Because they are now *interested* in this ministry.

Step 3 – Understanding

Based upon their studies and contemplations, this person now begins to *understand* the ministry that has captured their interest. They begin to understand the demands, the costs, and the requirements. They begin to understand the nature of cross-cultural missionary work. They also begin to understand the implications that the Great Commission may have for their life.

They begin to understand the lost state of mankind, the magnitude of the missionary task, its urgency, and the shortage of workers. As may be expected, this third step tends to be rather slow in developing, requiring both time and study.

Unfortunately, some people *skip* this step and go directly to attraction (step four), based only upon their interest (step two). When this happens, the attraction that ought to be based on a broad understanding of the ministry ends up being based instead on something much more *superficial* and *emotional*. And when this happens, there is a great risk of confusing a mere *emotional* calling with a true calling. *It is always better for the attraction to come after the step of understanding, so that this understanding can serve as a firm base for this attraction.*

Step 4 – Attraction

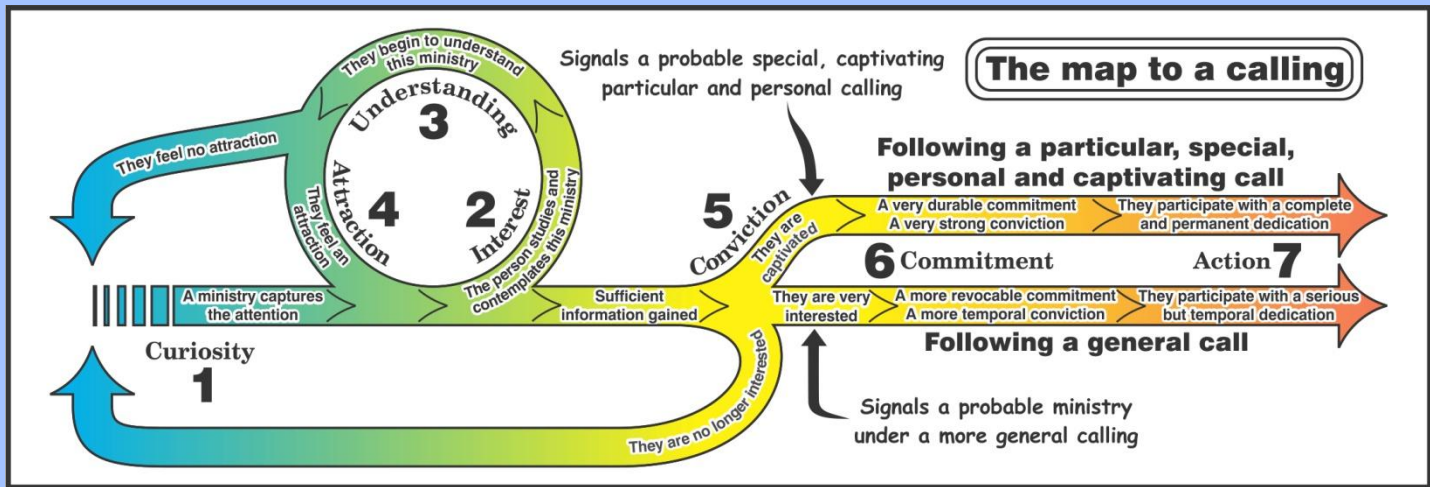
In this step, and based upon their interest and understanding of the ministry under study (the two previous steps), this ministry now either becomes something fairly attractive to the individual, or it begins to lose whatever attraction it might have had. In other words, in the light of their studies, contemplation, and understanding of the reality of this ministry, the idea of working in it either becomes attractive or not. If it is not attractive (or no longer attractive), then the person probably will cease studying and examining it. They will abandon this particular process and return to the first step where they will begin the process all over

again with *another* ministry that has aroused their curiosity. But, if the idea of working in this ministry is attractive to the individual, if they can see themselves working in it and being happy, if this ministry is truly desirable and credible from their perspective, then they will most likely stay “on course” with the process. This also might be the first time that they detect a hint that they might be receiving a calling to this ministry.

This attraction will usually lead to *greater* interest in this ministry, which in turn will lead to *greater* study and *greater* understanding, which oftentimes leads to even *greater* attraction. It is a cycle, where one step leads to the next, which leads to the next, and so on. This is why steps two, three, and four form a circle in the diagram which appears on the next page.

How long should a person spend in this cycle? The amount of time will vary greatly from individual to individual, and it especially will vary according to the degree of commitment that the person begins to feel toward this ministry. If they feel only a light commitment, they probably will not spend much time in this cycle before passing on to the next step. However, if they feel a *serious* level of commitment here, then they probably will spend much more time in this cycle so that they can more deeply understand this ministry before proceeding to the next step.

As mentioned above, it probably will be in this cycle of interest, understanding, and attraction, that the person, for the first time, will detect the possible existence of a special calling upon his or her life. And this is only logical. If the person has been captivated by



Christ for this ministry, then it should be in the process of studying and understanding it that they begin to understand the personal ramifications for their life. *Therefore, we may begin to look for possible missionary calls at some level in this series of cycles* (and we refer to *possible* calls because it is probably too early in the process yet to detect a *firm* calling).

Of course, in our analysis of this individual, they should have been in the series of cycles long enough to have achieved a certain degree of basic understanding of the ministry that they are contemplating. This reduces the tendency to confuse a mere “emotional call” with a possible true call. But, *when a person who has studied and understood the basic elements of missionary ministry begins to feel a strong attraction toward it and a serious desire to commit or dedicate*

himself or herself to this ministry, I believe that it is safe to say that this individual is “on the way” to a probable missionary call. If the person does *not* feel a serious desire to commit or dedicate himself or herself to this ministry, but still *does* feel an attraction toward it, then I believe that it is safe to say that *this individual is “on the way” to a probable general calling to work with this ministry.* The differences between a general calling and the special and captivating *missionary* calling will be highlighted in the remaining steps of this process.

Important: although we are specifically talking about recognizing a *missionary* call here, these same steps may be used to recognize other types of special and captivating calls as well (such as a pastoral call, the call to be an evangelist, etc.).

Step 5 – Conviction

When a person has been in the cycle of interest, understanding, and attraction for sufficient time, they acquire sufficient information to form a *firm* base for their decision regarding the next step. And the decision that they make will show their degree of *conviction* with regard to this missionary ministry. Looking at it from another perspective, the person has now reached the point in this cycle where the interest, understanding, and attraction that they feel toward this ministry have grown until they have become a *conviction*. And based upon this conviction, the person leaves the series of cycles and chooses one of three arrows in our diagram. Each one of these three arrows is an important indicator of whether or not this individual shows evidence of a missionary call.

Since arriving at step five means that this person has studied and contemplated this ministry *fairly seriously*, and has formed a *conviction* based upon this study and contemplation, then *we can expect to begin to see firm evidence in this fifth step with regard to the missionary call.* Therefore, we can now begin to speak of a *probable* call or a *firm* call (instead of just a *possible* call).

The first arrow is the lower one that doubles back toward the left in our diagram. This is the path of those who, after having studied and understood this ministry, now feel no great interest in it. For this person, either

God has not given them a serious interest in this ministry, or, this individual is ignoring an interest that God is trying to open in their heart. Either way, the result probably will be the same: this person most likely will return to the first step in the process and begin all over again with another ministry that catches their curiosity. As such, this individual does not show evidence of having received a missionary call.

The second arrow is the lower of the two that point to the right in our diagram. On this path we find the people who, after having studied and understood this ministry, feel that they are *interested* in this ministry, but *only* interested. They do not feel captivated for this missionary ministry, so they do not show evidence of having received a missionary call.

Having said this, we must also underscore that this individual is going to participate *actively* in this ministry, because they are interested (and perhaps *very* interested) in it. But they are not going to dedicate their life to this ministry and they are not going to live solely to fulfill this ministry. For them, this ministry is important, but not *imperative* or *obligatory*. Therefore, they will fulfill this ministry under a *general* (non-captivating) calling. In other words, this ministry is important to this individual because it is how they will currently fulfill their obligation to the Great Commission (their *general* call to missionary work). But in a year or two it is probable that they will find some other ministry connected with missions that they will work with for a couple of years, and after this, probably

another. We can say that their dedication to this particular ministry is serious, but not *permanent*. And their commitment or conviction may be referred to as “revocable,” “temporal,” or “temporary.” They will always be involved in *some* facet of missions ministry (since the general call to missions never expires this side of heaven), but the precise ministry and particular degree of dedication may vary from year to year.

The third arrow is the upper of the two that point to the right in our diagram. On this path we find the people who, after having studied and understood this missionary ministry, are not only interested in it, but *also have been captivated by Christ for this ministry*. They cannot live without fulfilling it. They no longer think “I can be a missionary.” Nor do they think “I want to be a missionary.” This type of thinking fits better in the series of cycles of interest, understanding, and attraction. Rather, at this fifth step of *conviction*, this person is more likely to think “I have to do this ministry; I can’t imagine doing anything else.” In short, this individual has reached the point of recognizing that he or she has been taken *captive* by Christ and returned to the local church to *dedicate* himself or herself to this ministry. When a person displays this degree of conviction, dedication, and commitment to a missionary ministry, we can say that they **do** show evidence of having received a missionary call.

And it appears that when a person with this type of a call arrives at this fifth step, they normally do not turn back. Nor do they switch to the lower arrow. *This*

individual is a “prisoner” and cannot change. They have detected and understood the special calling of God upon their life, and they have accepted this call and its ramifications. There are still two steps left to finish the process, but this individual now has “made the decision” to be a missionary, a prophet, an evangelist, or a pastor and teacher (to use the list from Ephesians 4). And please note the use of quotation marks above. Really, this person is not *making* this decision. *This decision was made by God before this person ever was born* (according to Galatians 1:15–16). Rather, this person actually is just recognizing and accepting the decision that God has already made.

The possibility of switching from the second arrow to the third always exists. With the passage of time, a person following the path of the second arrow (a general calling) can make the transition to following the path of the third arrow (a captivating call), if God increases the degree of their interest, commitment, and conviction. And this person switches arrows when their conviction and commitment become so strong that they show evidence that Christ has captivated them for this ministry. When this happens, this individual **does** show evidence of having received a missionary call.

Step 6 – Commitment

For the person who is following the path of a general call (the lower arrow of the two that point to the right), in this sixth step he or she *seriously* commits to

this missionary ministry, but in a more nonpermanent way, and many times for a specific timeframe. Therefore, their commitment is temporary, in a certain sense. They are not thinking of dedicating their *life* to this ministry. Furthermore, obstacles, discouragements, and opposition can negatively affect their level of commitment (*and the church must be careful to maintain these negative elements to a minimum*). And, with the passage of time, it is not unusual to see this individual begin to serve in another ministry. They have fulfilled God's leading in their life, *for this time period and this ministry area*, under a general call.

At the same time, the person who has been captivated for this ministry (and is following the upper arrow of the two that point to the right) feels a much more durable commitment and a much deeper and firmer conviction. In a very real sense, they now *live* for this ministry, and they no longer consider their life of any account if by sacrificing it they can finish the course and ministry that God has set before them (Paul's sentiment in Acts 20:24). Therefore, this person firmly and deeply commits their very *life* to the cause to which God has called them. And their conviction is so strong that it normally will overcome any obstacle, discouragement, and opposition. Of course, as with any human being, their commitment might wane a bit sometimes, but it always comes back.

Step 7 – Action

For the person who is following the path of a gen-

eral call (the lower arrow facing to the right), this last step perhaps begins with some sort of preparation or training for their ministry. But, expectations here need to be in accord with the individual's type of calling and degree of commitment and conviction (no one should expect this person to study a three-year course in missions so that they can work on the missions bulletin board for the next six months or a year). And once they have finished their training, these individuals will actively participate in this ministry with a serious but temporary (limited timeframe) dedication.

At the same time, for the person that is captivated for this ministry (the upper arrow facing to the right), this last step perhaps begins with dedicating themselves to receiving the serious and detailed type of training and preparation that their life of ministry will require. Once again, expectations ought to be in accord with the individual's type of calling and degree of commitment and conviction. For the future cross-cultural missionary, this very well may involve studying a full-time missionary training program for two to four years. But, since this individual is dedicating their *life* to this ministry, setting aside these years for training is not seen as being an extreme measure. And, when they are ready, they will participate in their ministry with a full and permanent dedication.

Four important questions

We finish this study with a quick look at four important questions with regard to the missionary call and

missions in general.

◆ **Who decides who ought to be a missionary?** God decides who ought to be captivated and called, set aside and dedicated for this task, and then sent out as a missionary. Neither the local church, nor the individual himself or herself, nor the missions agency make this decision. Rather, these three simply recognize and respect what God has already decided.

◆ **Who or what makes a missionary be a missionary?** What makes a missionary be a missionary is the fact that Christ has taken this individual captive and returned them to the church for the purpose of being a missionary. And we call this process (of being taken captive and returned to the church) “the missionary call.” So Christ, and not the local church, nor the missionary, nor the missions agency, makes a missionary a missionary. We may also add here that it is not the *activities* done by a missionary that makes this person a missionary. Being a missionary is the product of Christ’s captivating work in a person’s life, and their activities are simply the *fruit* or *consequence* of this work. In other words, a missionary does what he or she does because they are a missionary; *but they are not a missionary because they do what they do.*

◆ **Who determines that this person is going to be a missionary and that one not?** Christ captivates people according to His wisdom and sovereignty. He captivates some and not others. And the local church, the individual himself or herself, and the missions agency only recognize and respect what Christ has done, *and they seek to use this individual according to their calling, their gifts and abilities, and the existence of key similarities that qualify them to be a faithful representative of their sending entities* (for further details on this last item, see the article *How to Choose a Good Representative*, found under “Key concepts” on the “Missions info” tab of the WMA website).

◆ **Why should we be so concerned about the process of the missionary call if God is the One doing it all?** Although God is responsible to decide who is going to be a missionary and to call them to this task, it is our responsibility as the local church to *detect* this call if we are to recognize and respect what God has decided and done. In other words, God does all the deciding and assigning, and He communicates His decisions through the missionary call. But if we cannot *detect* this call, how can we ever expect to know what God wants to do and with whom?

