

'For this I was made': conflict and calling in the role of a woman priest

Adrian Madden, Katie Bailey and Jean Kerr

Abstract

There has been an increasing focus on 'work as calling' in recent years, but relatively few empirical sociological accounts that shed light on the experience of performing calling work. Although callings have generally been referred to as positive and fulfilling to the individual and as beneficial to society, researchers have also suggested there is a 'dark side' to calling, and have drawn attention to the potential conflicts and tensions inherent in the pursuit of calling, especially for women. This article explores these themes through the first-hand experiences of one woman who felt called to work as a priest. Her narrative illustrates how callings draw the individual irresistibly towards a particular line of work. It also shows how calling work can be both satisfying individually and beneficial to the wider community but, at the same time, involves sacrifice, compromise and a willingness to defer personal rewards.

Keywords

Women's callings, religious work, conflicts in women's callings, vocation, work intensity of callings, women priests

Introduction

The pursuit of a calling is often regarded as the most highly desirable orientation towards work, leading to personal fulfilment, life satisfaction and a sense of purpose and community (French and Domene, 2010; Myers and Diener, 1995). Although the precise definition of calling has been disputed, there is largely agreement that individuals can feel 'called' to both secular and religious occupations (Dik et al. 2009), and that these callings invoke a deeply personal sense of being drawn to a line of work that has a broader societal significance (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009), or is 'a consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain' (Dobrow, 2012: 433). Calling work, whether secular or religious, goes beyond identity in that it is focused on 'doing rather than simply being' (Elangovan, 2009: 429), and is regarded as being driven by a prosocial motivation, in either the direct or indirect service of others or of the greater good (Duffy and Dik, 2013).

Despite calling's ostensibly positive overtones, there is also a 'dark side' (Cardador and Caza, 2012; Duffy and Dik, 2013). Although pursuit of a calling might be personally satisfying and beneficial to wider society, callings are also associated with physical, material and psychic costs, the subordination of personal identity, and the perpetuation of inequalities (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2014; Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010). For women, the conflicted nature of calling may be even more salient (Sellers et al., 2005).

In this article, Jean's story reflects one woman's experience of calling work, employed in what could be regarded as the archetypal calling arena, the Church. Although past retirement age at 66, Reverend Canon Jean Kerr regularly works for over 90 hours a week across six or seven days for the Church of England in what seems at times a bewildering array of roles and responsibilities. Her story conveys on the one hand her very deep sense of personal fulfilment and the rewards accrued from a life spent in service of others and of her religion and, on the other, hints at the sacrifice and challenges she has faced as a priest and notably as a woman in pursuit of her calling. A number of

themes emerge from the narrative which are illustrative of the conflicted nature of calling work more widely.

Jean talks movingly of the personal turmoil involved in experiencing her initial call to religious work. Although the callings literature generally talks of 'being called' as a uniquely positive phenomenon and tends to gloss over the experiences that an individual goes through at this time (Rosso et al., 2010), Jean's narrative shows that feeling called to a vocation is a process that can be drawn out over many years, characterised by conflicting emotions, self-doubt, externally imposed delays and, in her case as a woman, inter-role conflict. This is reminiscent of Sellers et al.'s (2005) argument that women experience significant complexities at the intersection between spirituality, motherhood and vocation. Although experiencing her calling quite early in her life, Jean deferred her response to her calling to accommodate her husband's career and caring for her children, a 'call to wait' (Watson, 2002: 135), reflective of the trade-offs women generally have been found to make in their choice and pursuit of work (Corby and Stanworth, 2009; Oates et al., 2008).

Jean's enactment of her calling, with its exceptionally long working hours, conflicting demands and personal sacrifices, reflects the intensity and complexity referred to in O'Neil et al.'s (2008: 729) description of working women caught in 'cross currents in a river of time', and the futility of attempts to manage time or quantify outputs in temporal terms. Jean laughs at the idea of 'time management' and her narrative shows how her overwhelming sense of duty prevents her from stopping work while others need her. She also refers to the financial sacrifices she and her husband have made in pursuit of their calling when she says they have 'nowhere to retire to', in a similar way to the zookeepers in Bunderson and Thompson's (2009) study who sacrifice their personal time and income out of a sense of duty to their animals.

The intangible nature of calling work is invoked when Jean talks of the impossibility of measuring the impact of what she does in material or financial terms, and the tension between her personal and intuitive understanding of how her role can make a difference to the lives of others, as compared

with the bureaucratisation of calling implicit in the Ofsted inspections and the finance managers' requests for output and performance data. Jean's reaction to the idea of the measurement of calling echoes responses to what Ritzer (1993) terms 'the McDonaldization of care' in the context of nursing, a model through which 'all that can be measured are appearances and outcomes' but which cannot possibly appraise the quality and texture of human relationships or the value of vocational work done in the service of others; in other words, the impossibility of quantifying compassion (Bradshaw 2009: 467).

Berkelaar and Buzzanell (2014: 6) argue that the traditional discourse of religious callings, underpinned by Puritan-Calvinist rationalities, has obscured the reproduction of dominant interests and inequalities often implicit within vocation-based organisations. In particular, they highlight the 'negative space of female calling' in which women's callings are perceived not to have material or social value, but are 'defined by the surrounding positive forms of men's vocations or vocational troubles' (ibid). Historical notions of calling have thus served as a form of social control that have marginalised women, rendering their callings as invisible or less important. Certainly, aspects of Jean's narrative suggest how deeply-embedded patriarchal views of women's role in society and, notably, within the Church itself impeded her progress to ordination. It meant that, for many years, she effectively worked as an unpaid and, at times, invisible assistant to her vicar husband, reflective of Cook's (2010) argument that women's religious callings remain problematic and often 'denied to them' in the face of the 'stained glass ceiling' (Sullins, 2000: 243). In her narrative, Jean accepts her marginalisation prior to ordination as 'the vicar's wife, never Jean', although implicit in her account is a sense of injustice in the face of her denied identity.

Despite the hard work, long hours and low pay, Jean finds deep personal fulfilment in the enactment of her calling. Her many and varied roles have enabled her to impact positively on the lives of many individuals and groups at times of intense personal need; Jean talks of some profoundly personal and moving experiences that have, in her words, made it all worthwhile. In her narrative, the sense

of connection that Jean sees between her earlier work as a teacher, her personal life experiences and her ministry resonates with the notion that calling work provides a coherent life narrative (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2014). The example Jean gives of rocking a dead baby is a moving illustration of this sense of continuity between her own life and that of her congregation. Her calling thus appears to serve as an organising and integrating mechanism as it is framed around her sense of identity, a feeling she later articulates as 'for this I was made'. At the same time, however, enacting her personal beliefs seems to create other conflicts between role demands and her true self, for instance being a shy, introverted person being called upon to perform publicly in ways with which she is not immediately at ease. Thus, Jean's narrative shows that calling work, rather than always providing a uniform and coherent organising principle (Elangovan et al, 2010), may also be inherently conflictual. Elsewhere, she talks of not having a choice in responding to others' needs, reflecting a lack of perceived agency in the performance of her role that may resonate with accounts of other forms of calling work (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2014).

Although recognising the tensions inherent in her role and admitting to sometimes being 'overwhelmed' by the volume of work, Jean also talks of the enjoyment and gratitude she experiences in the 'binding and ennobling' (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009: 32) experience of her work as a priest. Jean's story illustrates the 'personal and social significance' of calling work (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009: 32) and reveals the sense of inescapable destiny experienced by the individual in responding to a call. At the same time, the narrative highlights the sacrificial and conflicted nature of calling work, particularly for women.

Jean's story

(i) *Being called to the work of ministry: "for this I was made"*

I've been full-time voluntary or part-time paid, but this is the first full-time paid role in the church. Being married to a priest, we made a conscious decision 43 years ago I would stop work to support

the ministry, and we had some children as well. I think I knew really within a couple of years of that there was a steer, a call, a vocation to full-time ministry but of course at that time it wasn't possible for women to be ordained and so I just was the extra pair of hands really, the unemployed vicar's wife, always introduced as the 'vicar's wife', never as 'Jean'. In the beginning, my husband was part-time hospital chaplain and the hospital was 10 miles away from the parish, so you can imagine every time he was in the hospital and the crises in the parish happened, they would come to the vicarage and, who's at the vicarage, baby under her arm, is me. I started dealing with stuff, with people, and got heavily into support and counselling, and that just spread really.

I've never applied for a job. I think I've struggled in life with thinking myself as capable as I probably am, I would never think to push myself forward. I didn't even push myself forward for ordination, it was other people's perceptions and in the end I got fed up with them nagging. I was utterly convinced they were all wrong. By nature I am a shy introvert, so it's hard work for me to meet people, but when I am in role it's much easier. If I am out there, 'this is Jean, she's come to lead us in ... ', I can do all that stuff. So my frontstage is very public, you can be very threatened because you're very exposed, but the backstage also has to be pretty tidy because if the gap gets too big between the two, disaster happens. So I like time to think, I like time to process. I love silence but my job really is more up front with people than it is the other way.

You go through a long process for selection [to be a priest], and at the final hurdle there's a selection conference and I went off that day saying, 'I know this is a waste of time'. The first thing they did was separate us into groups. If you were a working teacher you went to that corner of the room, if you were a doctor you went there, and there were all these different jobs, and I was the vicar's wife, and I'm stood in the middle on my own. We had to take an object out of the box and go and meditate on it. Well, I'm not really a meditative type, I'm fairly rebellious and I didn't really want to do it, but I put my hand in this box and out comes a pencil rubber and I thought, 'oh this is a big deal'. It was warm, maybe May time, we were outside and I'd got this pad of paper and I'm trying to

think holy thoughts and I start rubbing with this rubber and I rubbed so furiously I rubbed through layers and layers of paper, layers and layers of it, really frantically and then I had that sense of God speaking and he said 'you know I will never allow them to rub out who you are, give in' and at that moment I just knew that this ordination stuff was important for me as a human being and it was very clear, very concise, very specific. Nothing to do with the bible or praying, it was to do with a pencil rubber and my sheer frustration at what was happening to me. It clicked and I knew that all the other things that I had done in life, I'd worked in a bank, I'd worked in shops, I'd been trained as a teacher, all that stuff was like a series of dominos, each one triggering the next one along a trail that led to this thing that was going to happen. They were all connected. I could see it all ... that doesn't mean to say the stages weren't painful, the illnesses, the deaths, the disasters, I was run over by a car, we had two miscarriages ... all the stuff that happened, everything has been "useful" ... is a funny word, isn't it, but often when I am talking with people or ministering with people, particularly when I was doing hospice work, you know the little light would go on and I would suddenly think, 'that's what that was about'. Something has happened to me, and it just connects all the way along, it's astounding.

But it's been more than a work call, it's been a whole life's call. That's why we have nowhere to retire to because we haven't been stashing our money, but it's decisions you make. One of the phrases that's come to my mind a number of times over the ordained life has been, 'for this I was made', and there have been significant pieces of ministry work, whether it was in the hospice, as a volunteer chaplain on neurosurgery, the preaching, whatever, there have been a number of times when I come away from a piece of work absolutely elated. I can remember the first time it happened, and I can't remember the context but I can remember the sense of it, and I can remember saying to myself, 'if this never ever happens again life would have been worthwhile'. I can remember holding a dead baby, and the mum wouldn't touch it and I can remember holding this baby and rocking it, which is what you do, women do, is to rock babies, even though it was dead and just thinking, 'if I can just hold this for a moment longer maybe this mother will look', and she did ...

it took a lot of hours but eventually she could hold this child. I don't think you train people for that, I think it's an intuitive something that happens and, of course, you know in that dead baby were my own dead babies and, you know, this stuff, it's always connected, there's always a connection but you don't think of it at the time.

(ii) *The work of ministry*

I have a dual role ministry so I have two titles. I am Canon Missioner at the Cathedral [a residentiary post involved in the regular duties of the Cathedral also responsible for mission and outreach activities], and the rest of my time I am Director of Mission and Community Engagement for the Diocese, which means I am part of the Bishop's senior staff. My job is fairly wide ranging, and it's a big job.

Up until 3 years ago, there was only me doing it at all, there were no staff at all, but the job has just expanded. It is exceptionally full-time work, there are no prescribed hours but it is full-time, which means you work six days a week and are supposed to have a seventh day off. So, my regular type of pattern would be from about 7.30 in the morning until about 11.00 at night. I try and get a day off a week if possible. As a Director, I manage a team of people, some volunteers, some seconded, some paid, but I am understaffed administratively and mechanically. We haven't got a photocopier for doing big jobs and stuff like that. On top of that, I have also got the admin to do, I am part of Bishop's staff and that takes out four days a month; every Sunday I am preaching somewhere, presiding at communion, leading prayer, I am in residence at the Cathedral one day a week ... the place could burn down and it's my call today. As a Canon Missioner, I help parishes review their mission and ministry and help them to make forward plans and strategic steps to grow. I also oversee groups of churches we call deaneries and I am responsible for the deanery mission and ministry plans which are wider envisioning pieces of work, we've got 17 deaneries in the dioceses and I am responsible, so I will deal with clusters of clergy as well and clusters of lay people, all coming from different churches. So that's a huge task.

The day is structured as to what the workload is and where it's come from. I don't have much say because I need to do certain things, I have to go to staff meetings and because I tend to work with a 'yes' culture for myself, I will tend to accommodate wherever I can. I do say 'no' if I can't do it. There's so much to do in so many ways at so many levels that you are running to stand still. I am overwhelmed sometimes, a negative overwhelmed in the volume of it. I'm always rushing to the next meeting, but I'm also overwhelmed with gratitude that I've got it to do in the first place. Most of the time I'm just jolly happy that I've got it to do, I just love it. And that may be an overdeveloped sense of duty or care, it plays into my enthusiasm in that I can work here until midnight, 3 o'clock, whenever.

Don't anybody tell me about time management, it doesn't work in ministry. The concept of time is interesting. You have life, you have the length of the days, and time is something that's prescribed by somebody somewhere in the middle of it who says that you wear a watch, and you have so many hours, and an hour means this, and how much can you get done in that hour is prescribed by somebody else. But actually we have length of days, and what you do with them, that's a different ball game. I may be good at 50 minute slots now, that's the counsellor in me, so I can do 50 minutes to the minute without looking at a watch because you get used to the cycle of it. I'm always rushing to the next meeting, and we're trying to squeeze stuff in when really what we need to do is to allow more of a flow with things. The only way you can do that is by striking out days in your diary. I've got a new book about time management called 'Beyond Busyness'. It's funny, I went to the doctors and I took it with me. I thought I can read it because I'll be waiting, and I got one page in and the blooming buzzer went for me and I thought 'Oh, there you go'.

In a previous regime, we had quite a strong steer from finance people, they actually asked me once to cost out how much I was paid, the cost of having me with how many people I affected. They were asking all the wrong questions as far as I'm concerned. I can tell you how many sermons I've preached, how many communion services I've done, how many people we've had through the

Cathedral on certain days, how many people have sat in front of me for training. They asked me to cost it out and it worked out a penny a person or something.

We can't measure this stuff, what are the differences that you're making; I can do all that statistical stuff, but I can't tell you the effect it has on their lives, I can only tell you the anecdotal stuff that they tell me. There are some days when you come back and think, 'what on earth was that about?' I went out to a church to do some training, it was freezing cold, no hospitality, and there was a huge resistance to everything I was saying, and I thought, 'got this wrong' but actually I hadn't got it wrong, it was just a tougher nut than I had expected, and as I've been going week by week it's cracking a bit more and now they're starting to come like that, but how do you measure that, how do you measure such things?

When I was running a counselling service, Ofsted came, bless them ... 'Now, can you prove to me how these counselling sessions have changed these children's lives?' I had to say to them, 'You don't understand about counselling because actually this stuff is drip-feed'. It's about creating light and space for people to react differently, and you don't understand anything about very young children and how they react to trauma. You can't measure it like that.

What I do know is six months ago I had an email, out of the blue, from a girl that I did some counselling for, and she would be 10 then. There were a lot of difficulties in the family and she had left the school and, as far as I know, she'd had her sessions, she seemed more settled. She traced me through I don't know how many websites until she found me, to tell me that she was married, she was having a baby and if it hadn't been for the counselling sessions she'd had with me, she did not know where things would end up. Now how do you tell Ofsted that? I understand it's public money, I understand all that stuff but there are some things in life you cannot measure in the way that you can measure the number of apples in a box. You can't do it because we are human beings, not just human doings. There's more to us.

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