

# how can I know what God wants?



Don't bother trying to find God's will!



"The trouble with students is that they are too pre-occupied with trying to find out what God wants them to do with their lives, when they should spend more effort simply living out the Christian faith and God will make clear what he wants."

Tom, a retired Wycliffe missionary, was quite blunt and his words found their mark. I was a student at the time and the great question of "guidance" was uppermost in my mind. What I was going to do with my life had been a difficult enough question before I became a Christian, but now matters were considerably more complicated by bringing God into it. Or so I thought until Tom's sweeping remark knocked me over. I confess that I didn't really understand his contention at the time, but I now realise that he was completely right.

God has already issued general instructions for what He wants us to do with our lives. If He has special instructions for us we can be sure He will make them known when the time is right, but we usually want them well in advance and waste time and effort in frantically looking for them.



Just get on with living out the Christian life!

The commands He gives you are very straightforward, ranging from the call to live a holy life (**Colossians and Thessalonians**), through avoiding sin (**Colossians 3 and Ephesians 4 for example**) and doing good, (**Ephesians 4, 5**) to going into the world to make disciples (**Matthew 28**). There are plenty of others, but those will do for the moment. What is important

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about them is that they apply to us all equally. There may be grounds for saying that particular ministries are not your scene (I like teenagers - yes, I do, really! - but ministering to them is not my strong point), but there are several ministries to which we are all called, irrespective of particular gifting. What does God want you to do with your life? Give it to Him, live it out for Him, put your faith into action - at every moment, in everything you do and wherever you go. This basic attitude of submission is more important than anything else. But assuming that you are doing that, what are the ways in which God will let you know what He wants you to do in a more specific sense?

# Let's begin with a question you might not expect

## What do you want to do

It might sound a little crazy to ask you this question - after all, aren't you trying to find out what God wants? - but it really is a valid question.

Christians can be afflicted with the idea that God will only ask them to do something that they don't like or that they would not naturally want to do. Behind it lies a rather super-spiritual logic that believes you can only be used by God if you are either incompetent in your area of service, or unhappy.

You only have to look at Paul to see how far wide of the mark that is. Paul was a brilliant thinker, theologically trained under a leading rabbi of his day to give a strong foundation in Jewish thought, but also brought up in a Gentile city and so was well versed in pagan literature. Was it an accident that God wanted him to take the Gospel to the Gentile nations and explain how the Old Testament was fulfilled in Jesus Christ?

So what do you want to do? God frequently works through your own talents and desires (that He gave you, anyway), so it is not wrong to begin with these. Of course, God may lead you another way in the end, but at least start in the most logical place.

Look at your strengths and weaknesses. Examine the things that give you a buzz, and compare them with those things that turn you off. Or - if you want to put it in more overtly evangelical terminology - are there areas that you feel a burden for and want to work in? For instance, if you enjoy and feel fulfilled by praying with people, listening and sympathising, helping them to find God in their daily lives, then some form of pastoral care seems to be what you should think about. If you hate the club scene with its lights and loud music, if you don't understand current fads and fashions, and find yourself moaning about what society is coming to, then working with teenagers is probably not a good idea. **You get the idea...**

## What is going on around you?

The Bible tells us that God not merely knows all things, but that He is able to bring all things into line with what He wants. (**Ephesians 1:11**) He reassures us that He is guiding every event in our lives.

We tend to apply that only to the bad events that come our way, or the big decisions that we must make, when in reality it concerns everything. The smallest detail of our lives is under His control, even the most apparently insignificant, and it is to these that we should learn to pay attention.

What has been happening around you? Have you come across articles in the newspaper that have directed your thoughts to a particular country? Perhaps these have synchronised with a book that was placed into your hands, a video that you watched, or a talk that you heard. Perhaps a seemingly chance meeting has awakened an interest in something that you cannot just shake off. Whatever the circumstance, you must believe that nothing happens by chance and that it is quite within God's ability to engineer a series of events to lead you to understand what He is saying.

Take a look around, therefore. You might find that God has been leaving some surprising trails for you to follow.



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What are people saying to you?



One of the most valuable sources of help in thorny issues is your friends, and especially the more spiritually mature ones. I realise it is possible to choose your counsellors by what you want to hear, but I am assuming you are not going to do that on such an important matter. The last thing you really need is someone who will do nothing more than stroke you gently and rehearse one of the many Christian platitudes about full-time service - such as: "We need you here... what would your mother think?...".

You will have in your circle of friends men and women whom you respect and trust for their faith and wisdom. They will not necessarily be old, but they will almost certainly have a few more years of Christian living behind them than you and it is to them that you should turn. How do they see you? If they have watched you grow up and mature they will understand you far more than you realise and their opinions about you will prove extremely valuable. And don't forget your church leaders, either. As a Mission, we will look to them for confirmation of your character, gifts and spirituality, so you need to consult them as well. Their assessment and advice will be among the most important that you will receive during this period.

## How is God leading you?

Lastly (but by no means least!) it would not be surprising if your current interest has been awakened through your home church or fellowship. Many people hear the challenge to missionary service at a meeting in their home church. They had not been aware of a need before, but the Lord uses the meeting to confront them very directly about going. Alternatively, it is possible that He has been speaking through passages of Scripture, or perhaps certain subjects have come up repeatedly in your prayers.

If you want to obey God's will, He will not leave you without guidance, so we would like to suggest the following easy method for determining what He is saying.

Buy yourself a small notebook and take it with you wherever you go. In it note down everything that you believe God is saying to you about this question. Include every incident that could possibly relate to the subject, whether a chance conversation, a newspaper cutting or Bible reading. Don't worry about how many (or how few) entries you have, or that there might be long periods of time during which you write nothing. Over a number of months (more likely, years) you will not merely hear what God is saying, you will see it because it will be written down for you. More than likely, you will discover the surprising trails we mentioned earlier that God has been leaving for you.

So, what has God been saying to you?

ECM programme details on page 053

# a way into mission

## Taking the first steps

People sometimes feel overwhelmed by the number of Christian agencies and churches working in cross-cultural ministry, and find it very difficult to choose between them. We hope that this article will help you to know where to start and clarify your thinking as you go along.

If you are thinking of undertaking a programme overseas, whether short or long term, ask yourself and ask God about your sense of 'call.' Are you thinking of going because you're fascinated by different people and cultures? Or do you sense an interest that goes beyond that and which you feel may lead to working abroad in a long-term capacity? If the latter, then read on to find out what those first steps should be.

If you're a married or engaged couple it's important that you should be agreed on your course of action. Differences of opinion which may seem unimportant here can become very significant when you're operating in a different culture.

## six steps at the start

Take time out to pray and listen to God. Ask him what this sense of call means, and that you might know how to interpret it and act upon it.

Find out what qualifications and language skills are needed and whether you need to do any further study at this stage.

Talk with church leaders and those who know you best. Ask others to pray for you as you seek guidance and clarity.

Ask yourself whether there's a specific people group or area of the world to which you feel drawn and find out more about those people and places.

Do some research and see which organisation or church group works in the area that you feel called to and whether they engage in the sort of projects that are of interest to you.

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# finding your way

Once you have a clearer idea of the area of the world you feel called to work in, or the people group that you would like to work amongst, you can begin to narrow the field considerably. Make contact with the organisations that are of most interest and ask for some introductory materials. Read through these and see which you feel most drawn to. Pray about your choices as you work your way through.

The following checklist may be helpful:

**1** Check out their mission statement to find out what makes them tick. What's their vision for the next 10 years? Are they future focussed? What goals do they hope to achieve? Do they have a strategy for achieving those goals?

**2** Look at the mission's theological or doctrinal statement. How do they contextualise their theological distinctives? What's important to them and does it tie in with what's important to you (ie if you're a charismatic, is it charismatic? If you're reformed, is it reformed?)

**3** Talk with them about your sense of call. To what extent are they willing to explore this with you to a people/to a place/to a cause? How do they respond to God's dealings with you? Do they think that you'd fit well with them? If so, why?

**5** Think about the people you've met who make up the organisation. Do you feel there is good communication? Do you enjoy being with them? What style of leadership do you see being modelled? Are women actively involved in ministry and leadership?

**7** Think about how this organisation would work alongside your church. Do they have active partnerships with other churches? How would they maintain their links with your church once you're living abroad? Will they encourage the church to pray and give, visit and be involved generally?

**8** Ask about the financial arrangements. What systems are there in place? How much money do you need to raise? What help will they offer?

**9** Ask about the prayer base of the organisation. Are there people who will support you in prayer and encourage your church and others to pray for you? Will they advise you in the production of prayer letters and provide prayer materials themselves?

**4** Think about how you respond to the organisation. Do you share their vision? Do you like what you see in their leaders? In what spirit do they carry out their ministry? Does the image that you've seen from the outside, match what you find on the inside?

**6** Ask about the level of pastoral care they provide both in the UK and overseas. Do you find the organisation helpful and supportive? Do you feel they're able to look after you (your family and dependents?) Do they have good support systems in place? What about education and housing? If you run into difficulties, do you feel you can rely on them to help?



There may also be generational issues that you would like to address. More and more mission agencies are finding that the mission recruits of the present and future look nothing like the mission recruits of the past. This can lead to real tensions as younger missionaries observe their 'authority' figures' view on moral issues, diversity within expressions of spirituality, and issues of truth, honesty and integrity. **A new generation of mission workers will consider the following factors in choosing a mission agency:**

The capacity to develop their own identity

The freedom to be flexible and creative

The opportunity to try new things/seek out new experiences

The scope to embrace diversity

The opportunity to partner in leadership

The place to belong

No organisation or church will be perfect. Things can and do go wrong, but with goodwill and open communication, most matters can be resolved satisfactorily. The important thing is to find the sort of organisation that suits you (and your family if you have one) and which will work alongside your church to provide the support and encouragement you need as you begin a new period in your life and ministry.

Look for opportunities to meet with people from the organisation. Go to events they organise. Get an inside picture. Talk with people 'on the ground'. These are all ways in which you can make sense of the call of God on your life.

We all struggle with guidance at times (Christian leaders included), but very often the process of prayerful listening to God and investigating and researching the way ahead is the process by which we are formed and made ready for the very task God is calling us to. Everything may fall into place quite quickly or it may take a lot longer than we would want, but that is the process and God's timing is always immaculate even though it may be very different from our own.

