Kindling Group

THE CALLING

WHAT’S YOUR CALLING?
ABOUT THE CALLING

The Calling is a four-part national PBS series following seven Americans from their first days of training, through years of challenges, doubts, triumphs and surprises, and into their early practice as ordained spiritual leaders. Produced by a team of multi-faith filmmakers and led by Series and Executive Producer Danny Alpert, this intimate look behind cloistered seminary walls provides a rich, nuanced portrayal of faith never before seen on national television. While the United States is one of the most religiously observant and spiritually diverse countries in the world, faith often clashes with contemporary society. The Calling reveals a new paradigm: passionate spiritual leaders, who commit to a life of religion and service without compromising their strong identification with modern culture.

WHERE TO WATCH
IGNITING CHANGE

THEORY OF CHANGE

In planning engagement campaigns for Kindling films, we draw from the lived experiences of our characters. The Calling is a film about personal growth and finding your way in modern life. The nuanced stories don’t necessarily lend themselves to advocating for broad systemic change or asking the viewer to take a specific action. So, Kindling Group crafted What’s Your Calling? — an engagement campaign designed to get individuals reflecting on their own sense of calling, with opportunities for engaging in community service suiting their needs and values.

ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN

Profiling individuals from diverse backgrounds—professional snowboarders, jazz musicians, tug boat captains, academics, improvisers, Muay Thai fighters, religious leaders, social workers, environmental activists, toy inventors — What’s Your Calling? shares what people have been called to do with their lives, secular and spiritual, and how they hope to change the world.

Launched in 2010, What’s Your Calling? used a screenings campaign with ITVS, website, blog, video campaign, and social media to encourage viewers to consider their own callings and engage with opportunities for service.

WATCH: WHAT’S YOUR CALLING?

4.5 MILLION broadcast viewers

115 nonprofit and community partners

900+ signups for community service

KOSHER SLAUGHTER

LAKOTA TATTOO

VOICE OF CONSCIENCE

Kindling Group
“Tonight you released the energy of your courage and allowed it to flow into all of us; while you blessed us in your vulnerability. I need that, and thank you.”

“I used to explain that I don’t go to church to “escape,” I go to be “fortified for the struggle.” ... Thank you for your commitment and perseverance.”

“I’ve spent most of my life doing jobs that “weren’t me.” I didn’t fit in them. The things I loved to do, I did on the side, weekends etc. Not anymore.”

“Did not ever consider law, but in one year I’ll be applying to law school. I too feel as if God led me there in order to be the voice for women and girls who do not have one.”

“I think God is trying to say, I’ve given you talents/abilities for a reason and now is the time to consider putting them to use.”

“There are countless people who are willing to work hard to pursue their calling, but without luck one can never find the success they seek in their calling. I agree whole-heartedly that you must pursue your passions/love without viewing them as a means to an end.”

65+ What’s Your Calling? videos sparked digital reflection and conversation.
THE NUMBERS

WHO SAW IT?

4.5M

BROADCAST VIEWERS

100+

WHAT'S YOUR CALLING? WEBISODES

85

ITVS COMMUNITY SCREENINGS

WHO'S TALKING ABOUT IT?

471,045

YOUTUBE VIEWS

94,791+

WEBSITE HITS

1755

YOUTUBE COMMENTS

WHO TOOK ACTION?

900+

SIGNUPS FOR COMMUNITY SERVICE

1,671+

MONTHLY ACTIVE FACEBOOK USERS

115

NONPROFIT AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS
THE CALLING

What surprised me most about this inquiry was not what I learned about their faith in God, but rather what was revealed about their driving passion to serve their fellow human beings. What unified this group, with members so varied in background, faith and approach to their work, is the call to make the world a better place. Yes, the film portrays individuals who are making a commitment to their faiths. But more importantly, they are finding ways to be of service to their communities and beyond. We can see their stories and ask ourselves: What do I believe in? What questions do I want to understand? What gives me passion? How can I give back? What is my calling?

And that was the jumping off point for the What's Your Calling campaign — encouraging more people to wrestle with these ever-present questions.

IMPACT STORY  Danny Alpert, Director

I grew up in a warm and observant Jewish home outside Chicago, where the religious calendar and rituals set our family’s pace and the community was our extended family. As a teenager I strongly considered joining the rabbinate — I was accepted to a “pre-rabbinical” program, and even put a deposit on a dorm. But for many reasons, it was not to be. Over the following years, while my religious observance waned, my interest in faith and its struggles with modernity (and in particular the unique American brand of modernity) continued and intensified. And 20 years later, the questions still lingered: “What if….? Who would I have become if I had become a rabbi?” The Calling grew out of a need to explore that question and to look at the future of faith in the United States.

The young people who opened up to us for The Calling at the crossroads of their lives are the window into that future and, for me, into my past. But what I found there was not what I expected. I admire The Calling’s up-and-coming leaders for their dedication and perseverance, and I love them for their huge hearts and self-scrutiny.
In a time of rapid globalization, it is more important than ever to promote awareness, understanding, and openness to different points of view and belief systems. *The Calling* participated in ITVS’ flagship engagement program, Indie Lens Pop-Up, a national initiative supporting the strategic use of select Independent Lens films for social impact. Indie Lens Pop-Up brings people together for film screenings and community-driven conversations throughout the broadcast season, in over 70 cities across the country.

In designing a screening and engagement campaign for *The Calling*, ITVS’s engagement team focused on themes of service and interfaith exchange.

That’s why we leveraged an ongoing partnership with the Points of Light Foundation to incorporate the film into their annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service programming, screening at community gatherings nationwide. Each screening featured discussions on the meaning of service, and participants were encouraged to volunteer on projects related to themes highlighted in the film. *The Calling* and the other Independent Lens films featured in the Day of Service programming in January 2011 reached over 4,000 volunteers at 113 events, and 900 individuals signed up for volunteer projects after participating in the screenings and discussions.

The station and community partner-led events for *The Calling* brought together approximately 3296 community members. Our local partner organizations included the Interfaith Alliance of Middle Tennessee in Nashville, the Islamic Center of Western Michigan in Grand Rapids, Season Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston, and the Fuller Seminary in southern California, among many others.

ITVS also managed the creation of lesson plans and film modules to support young adults on the verge of making important life decisions. Since the launch of the resources in 2011, the lesson plans, film modules and other resources have been viewed over 5,000 times (5,293 views).
I want to end on one standout experience — from an event hosted by the Pitches Detention Center in Castaic, California, part of the LA County jail system. Inmates who participated in the event were part of the Sheriff Department’s MERIT program (Maximizing Education Reaching Individual Transformation), facilitated by volunteers, professional instructors, and LASD’s Deputies and Custody Assistants who embrace a belief that incarcerated individuals can invoke significant change in their lives.

The inmates were so excited to speak in person to Rob Pene and Rabbi Shmuly, two of the protagonists featured in The Calling. Spiritual growth is a focus area of the MERIT program, and the inmates valued this opportunity to discuss their crises of faith with Rob and Shmuly. At one point, a gentleman who had actually known Rob Pene “from back in the day” stood up — the two used to rap together! They had an emotional reunion, and actually ended up free-styling for the group. The energy in the room was phenomenal, as the two rapped on stage and the inmates cheered them on. The emotional morning came to a close, as Rabbi Shmuly gave the crowd a blessing, at the request of one of the inmates – and I sense that this moment was as transformative for the incarcerated men as it was for the ITVS team.
The Calling continues to be a remarkable treatise that explores the thoughts and actions of young leaders as they become change makers in their respective religious communities. Committing to a life of spiritual leadership is difficult and many aspiring clerics are hesitant because there just isn’t enough concrete guidance on what this life means in popular culture. This film displays to the world the remarkable exceptions.

While we were filming, being engaged in such a unique opportunity was not lost on me — especially as I was learning the skills to be an effective spiritual leader. And indeed, one of the byproducts of participating in the documentary was that it prepared me for the intense communal scrutiny that happened once I joined the rabbinate. Being a rabbi means people are constantly looking to you for guidance and spiritual support — you’re always ready for your close-up.

Participating in the film led me towards deep introspection, and helped me to understand how I could be more intentional and conscious in my decision-making processes. I can watch the documentary now and reminisce about my early work with Uri L’Tzedek and our national boycott — the confluence of school, personal life, and Jewish activism was happening so fast at a time when everything felt like a blur. Being able to look back now and see those moments slowed down grants me the opportunity to reflect on what my colleagues and I accomplished at a particularly momentous time in my life. It’s is a truly powerful feeling.

Today, there is a misunderstanding in the relationship between laypeople and clergy. — whether they are rabbis like me, pastors, priests, imams, monks, or whatever mantle one takes. People in the clergy have their regular human struggles; they aren’t beyond having their crises of faith. That is where The Calling shines: it plainly shows the inner conflicts of young people seeking spiritual renewal and guidance, at the same time as they take on the burden of pastoral, intellectual, and ethical community leadership. It’s the perfect primer for individuals who want to pursue this line of work, or service of any kind.

It’s a humbling experience when strangers recognize me from the film, and share how it affected them. Those few moments where we can talk about the deeper meaning of religion in America and its power to engender social change for the most vulnerable in society are so consequential to me. The Calling highlighted the power of art and media to create programming that positively influences the way people look at the broader world.
Learn more and get involved

THE CALLING

www.kindlinggroup.org/calling