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**PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* PRESENTS *THE CALLING*,  
A SPECIAL FOUR-HOUR, TWO-NIGHT EVENT ABOUT SEVEN YOUNG PEOPLE —  
CATHOLICS, PROTESTANTS, MUSLIMS AND JEWS — WHO ARE TRAINING FOR  
THE MINISTRY**

***The Calling* Premieres on December 20 and 21, 2010**

(San Francisco, CA) *The Calling*, a groundbreaking four-hour documentary series that follows the stories of seven young Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim Americans who are training for religious leadership, takes viewers into the unknown world of seminaries to reveal the real people "behind the robes." Produced by a multid denominational team of filmmakers led by Series Director/Executive Producer Danny Alpert, *The Calling* will air nationally on the Emmy® and Peabody Award winning PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by America Ferrera, on Monday, December 20, 2010 and Tuesday, December 21, 2010, from 9 to 11 PM (check local listings).

It takes a true calling to make faith a way of life. *The Calling* follows seven dedicated young people on a dramatic journey as they prepare to become professional clergy. Embarking on life paths that demand tremendous personal sacrifice and commitment, these seminarians must uphold timeless truths in an era that values quick fixes and hot trends, and face a public that challenges the very relevance of their mission. A new look at an old job, *The Calling* presents a fascinating look at how faith is lived today.

*The Calling* follows its subjects from their first days of training, through years of study, and into their early practice as religious leaders. We see them within and beyond the walls of school, wrestling with the sacrifices they've made to pursue this path. They debate theology and



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philosophy, learn to deliver sermons, perform their first weddings and funerals, and counsel people in crisis. We also get to know them as ordinary young people at the crossroads of their lives, struggling with doubt and fear, dating and family, and the myriad challenges of becoming an adult.

Although from different ethnic, geographic, and religious backgrounds, the young people featured in *The Calling* share similar traits: they're charismatic and likeable, driven and self-reflective, confident yet humble. Each is seeking to reconcile the modern world with their ancient faith, balancing egos with a desire to serve, and blazing new paths to leadership while preserving age-old traditions.

As this new generation of religious leaders prepares to take its place in our society, their unfolding stories explore some of the current issues facing America's religious communities. Islam strives to establish its American identity. The Catholic Church responds to sexual abuse scandals and the demographic shift to a Spanish-speaking majority, while African American churches adapt to women taking more active leadership roles.

The United States is one of the most religiously observant and spiritually diverse countries in the world, yet mainstream media has surprisingly under-represented the significance of faith in the U.S. Pluralism has been explored almost exclusively in terms of race and culture, while explorations of faith often focus on scandals or extremism. *The Calling* underscores spiritual common ground and offers intimate portraits that provide a fresh and nuanced portrayal of faith in today's America.

In addition to the broadcast, *The Calling* will be supported by *What's Your Calling?* (WYC), a digital and community engagement campaign that explores the notion of "calling" from both religious and secular perspectives, through a variety of media and written commentary. Through this content and user discussion, WYC ([www.whatsyourcalling.org](http://www.whatsyourcalling.org)) will engage participants in conversations about why and how people are following their "calling," seeking to make the world a better place through art, politics, business, music, aid, sports, medicine, philanthropy, media, religious leadership, and beyond. WYC will also provide participants with opportunities to take action around the issues and causes they feel called to by connecting with WYC partner organizations focusing on service and leadership. *What's Your Calling?* is a partnership between The Kindling Group, See3 Communications, Active Voice, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS).

To learn more about the film and outreach activities, visit *The Calling* interactive companion website ([pbs.org/the-calling](http://pbs.org/the-calling)), which features detailed information on the series, including interviews with the filmmakers and links and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter. The site also features a Talkback section, where viewers can share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film, and more.

### **About the Subjects**

**Shmuly Yanklowitz** is a student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School in Riverdale, New York, who works to make an impact on the world: from protesting at Free Tibet rallies, to starting Uri Le'Tzedek, an ambitious new social action organization in the Modern Orthodox community. Since filming, Shmuly has been ordained, currently serves as the Senior Jewish Educator at UCLA, and has started a West Coast branch of Uri L'Tzedek.

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**Yerachmiel Shapiro**, a recent graduate of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, takes a position as the rabbi for a tiny congregation in Red Bank, New Jersey. He and his wife, Helene, are also expecting their first child, for whom he will be the primary caregiver. Since filming was finished, Yerachmiel accepted a position as rabbi at Moses Montefiore Anshe Emunah Congregation in Baltimore.

**Tahera Ahmad** is an outspoken young Muslim scholar, schoolteacher, and student in Hartford Seminary's Muslim Chaplaincy program in Connecticut. She is also recently married. Tahera currently works as the Department Head of Islamic Studies at the Islamic Foundation School in Villa Park, Illinois and will soon start as an Associate Chaplain at Northwestern University.

**Bilal Ansari**, an African American father of four and a student in Hartford Seminary's Muslim Chaplaincy program. He works in the federal prison system in Connecticut and is an interfaith clergy organizer for Universal Health Care.

**Steven Gamez** is Tejano (Texan/Mexican), born and raised on San Antonio's west side. He entered the Catholic seminary in the hopes of becoming a "servant priest" — pastoring to the underserved in his home community. Steven is now pastor at St. Philip of Jesus Catholic Church in San Antonio, where his grandmother worshipped and his father was an altar boy.

**Rob Pene**, a Samoan, is busy studying at the Haggard School of Theology at Azusa Pacific University, working with a Presbyterian Minister in an upper-middle-class Los Angeles church, and mentoring poor teenage boys. All this is on top of a budding career as a Christian rapper, which he sees as his tool to minister to young people. Rob recently launched a new business focused on serving ministries, small businesses, schools, and mission-minded individuals.

**Jeneen Robinson** is an African American single mother, as well as a newly ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church living in Los Angeles. Jeneen recently finished directing a summer camp for inner-city youth at her church and writes and performs in church-based plays and musicals.

### **About the Filmmakers**

#### **Daniel Alpert (Series Director and Executive Producer)**

Alpert is a documentary producer, director, and editor whose films have been nominated for Academy® and Emmy® Awards, have aired on PBS, HBO, and A&E, and have screened at festivals around the world. Alpert's last film, *A Doula Story*, aired on PBS stations across the nation and was honored with a Casey Medal for Meritorious Journalism and other awards. Previously, Alpert directed *A History of God*, a two-hour documentary special for A&E Networks, based on the bestseller by British theologian Karen Armstrong. He co-produced and edited *Legacy*, a feature-length documentary for HBO, which was nominated for a 2001 Academy Award® for Best Documentary Feature, a National Emmy® for Best Documentary and was an official selection at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival.

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From 1994 to 1997, he produced *No Time to be a Child*, a three-part series that aired nationally on PBS and was nominated for an Emmy. Alpert is Executive Director of The Kindling Group in Chicago.

**Susanne Suffredin (Editor and Co-Producer)**

Suffredin has distinguished herself in both production and post-production for work on numerous award-winning dramatic and documentary films. Prior to her work on *The Calling*, she edited and co-produced *Do No Harm* (The Kindling Group), which has screened in festivals around the country and recently aired on PBS, and she has just started production as director on *Invisible People*, a feature length documentary (The Kindling Group). In 2004 Suffredin edited the documentary *A Doula Story*. She was co-director and editor on the short film, *There is No Place Like Home* (Turner Classic Movies), and was post-production supervisor on Kartemquin Films' highly acclaimed *Hoop Dreams*. Suffredin was also a contributing producer and editor on the award-winning *5 Girls*, broadcast on the PBS series *P.O.V.*

**Beth Sternheimer (Series Co-Producer)**

Sternheimer relocated to Chicago from Boston, where she worked as a documentary producer and researcher for independent films and museum projects. She was the associate producer for *Secrecy*, an independent documentary on government secrecy and for *Traces of the Trade*. Both films premiered at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival and *Traces* was broadcast on *P.O.V.* In addition, Beth was part of a team nominated for a 2009 national Emmy® Award for Outstanding Research on *Traces of the Trade*. Sternheimer was also the associate producer for *Unfinished Symphony*. Her museum work includes producing exhibit videos for the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, National Archives, and the newly built Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center.

**Yoni Brook (Director, Jewish Stories)**

Brook is a film director and photographer. His documentary film *Bronx Princess* (with Musa Syeed), about a teenager becoming an African princess, broadcast nationally on the PBS series *P.O.V.*, and premiered at the Berlinale and IDFA. His first documentary, *A Son's Sacrifice*, about a halal slaughterhouse, premiered on *Independent Lens* and won Best Documentary Short at the Tribeca Film Festival and International Documentary Association Awards. Brook has worked as a photojournalist at *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. He was the youngest ever to be selected for Photo District News' "30 Photographers to Watch."

**Alicia Dwyer (Director, Evangelical Christian Stories)**

Dwyer is currently directing *Xmas Without China*, a documentary about the relationship that promises to define this century — that between the US and China — through the quirky story of a Chinese immigrant who challenges an American family to have Christmas without any Chinese products. Swyer co-wrote/directed *Holy Land: Common Ground*, about Israelis and Palestinians who are grappling with history, homelessness, and how to live as neighbors (2008). She was associate producer/editor of the 2004 Emmy-nominated HBO series *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* and associate producer of the 2001 Academy Award®-winning feature documentary *Into the Arms of Strangers*.

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**Musa Syeed (Director, Muslim Stories)**

Syeed is an independent filmmaker and writer. His most recent film, *Bronx Princess*, premiered at the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam and the Berlin International Film Festival. His previous film, *A Son's Sacrifice*, won Best Documentary Short from the Tribeca Film Festival in 2007. Both films aired nationally on PBS. He is currently producing a narrative feature about environmental conflicts in Kashmir. As writer/director, Syeed received the Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Production Award for his screenplay. Syeed was a Fulbright Fellow in Cairo, Egypt, and he taught documentary production at Williams College.

**Maggie Bowman (Director, Catholic Story)**

Maggie Bowman produced *Election Day* (Arts Engine), a verite documentary that followed a dozen American voters on November 2, 2004. The film premiered at South by Southwest Film Festival and was broadcast on the PBS series *P.O.V.* in 2008. She was a field producer for *The Good Mother* for ARTE France, associate-produced *Unfinished Country*, a film about Haiti's 2006 presidential elections for PBS's *Wide Angle*, and has produced for *The Brian Lehrer Show*, a public affairs talk show on New York Public Radio. Prior to her work in film, Bowman was a union organizer and consultant.

**About *Independent Lens***

*Independent Lens* is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 PM on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about a unique individual, community, or moment in history. Presented by the Independent Television Service (ITVS), the series is supported by interactive companion websites and national publicity and community engagement campaigns. Further information about the series is available at [www.pbs.org/independentlens](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens). *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts. The series producer is Lois Vossen.

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