

VOCATIONCARE

APPROACH

listen

practice

engage

VOCATIONCARE ESSENTIALS

*Core practices for
discerning vocation
in Christian community*

Workshop and Retreat Resources

Version 1.2x

Version 1.2x—February 2017

Elements of this resource have been adapted from the following:

Vocation CARE Leaders' Guide: Congregations and Young People Exploring Call Together
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“Framing Self-Awakening Questions: adapted from Caryl Hurtig Casbon “Framing Open Questions” and the Center for Courage and Renewal “Guidelines to Asking Open and Honest Questions.”

“Theological Reflection”/“Reflect and Connect for Meaning and Purpose” adapted from Rev. Erik Samuelson “Vocation and Formation: A Community Discernment Curriculum” from Trinity Lutheran College in Everett, WA.

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Holy Listening

Holy listening is very different from every day listening, where often we listen to what is being said only enough to form a response. Holy listening invites us to slow down, take a look around, and create space between us to speak the truths of our lives out loud to one another. We focus on the speaker, as the listener practices a disciplined posture of care, hospitality, relaxed awareness, and attentiveness. We are invited to listen to another person in the way we listen to scripture. Douglass Steere writes of the sacred nature of this practice: “To ‘listen’ another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.”

God is revealed to us in the stories of scripture, and in the stories of God’s community. When we gain the ability to listen to one another deeply, we may begin to notice the presence of God in other people’s stories—and more and more in our story as well. Creating a space for those stories to live and move is part of creating a community where we all have room to discover our gifts and become who God is creating us to be.

When have you experienced this kind of listening?

Testimony

Testimony is the practice of sharing with honesty the stories that give meaning to our lives. In some churches, it means standing up to tell your conversion experience or personal salvation story. Testimony can include these stories but can also be seen more broadly. Dori Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer encourage us in this practice not only to focus on “God’s already-finished action in the world” but also to testify of those moments that have “been tucked into the seams of everyday living” because “in the presence of an artful listener, we may better be able to discern a pattern of calling, claiming, and ongoing revelation woven through these life events.” Testimony is simply telling the truth of our lives out loud to one another. As we share stories about our lives, we testify to our truths.

What images or connotations does the word “testimony” evoke in you? What memories of “testimony” do you have from your upbringing?

Practice: Holy Listening and Testimony

Find a partner and decide who will share first, and who will share second.
You will have 2 minutes in silence to think, and then 2 minutes each to share your story.

Listeners: Make eye contact. Give your full attention. Pretend that you have all the time in the world.

Storytellers: Speak from your heart. Don’t worry about having a beginning, middle and end.
Add details to draw us in to the story, try to be specific and descriptive.

Tell a story about a time when someone took you or your gifts seriously.

(2 min silence, 2 min person A, 2 min person B)

SELF-AWAKENING QUESTIONS

Jesus asked his friends and followers an important question: “What do you want me to do for you?” Sometimes he would do what they asked. But the question always invited them to interrogate their lives and their deepest desires. Good questions, asked by a caring listener, can wake us up to our own lives, the life around us, and to the life of God.

Self-awakening questions are not always the questions we are in the habit of asking, but they become more habitual with practice. They help us recognize gifts, listen more attentively for God’s presence, and hear God’s call. They are questions that emerge when our heads and hearts are open to the holy. We invite the storyteller to explore metaphors or images that help the explore who she is, what she loves, and what she cares passionately about. Rather than satisfy our curiosity, these questions help the speaker walk around in his story long enough to remember risks, challenges, choices, and outcomes—and notice the presence of God.

Who in your life has asked you questions that led you to go deeper into your story, your passions, your values? What were the questions?

Framing Self-Awakening Questions

The best questions are simple, brief and to the point. They are not questions to which you could anticipate the answers, or with right or wrong answers. Invite the storyteller deeper self-reflection on his or her faith, gifts and sense of call or meaning. Ask “how,” “what” or “why” questions. Invite images or metaphors because they can open things up in ways that more direct questions don’t. Ask questions to clarify feelings, images, passions, concerns, hopes and values as well as patterns and themes in his or her story. Ask questions aimed at helping the storyteller to walk around in his or her story—in order to remember the risks or challenges, choices and outcomes—rather than satisfying your own curiosity. Watch the pacing of the questions, allowing some silence. Trust your intuition in asking questions. As you listen deeply to the storyteller allow your questions to emerge from a place where your head and heart are opened to the presence of the holy.

What are some questions you might ask that could help someone “go deeper” with their story?

Practice: Self Awakening Questions

Find a partner and decide who will share first, and who will share second. You will have 2 minutes in silence to think, and then 2 minutes to share your story. The listener will then have 2 minutes to form and ask a Self Awakening Question (and listen to the response).

Tell a story about a time when someone took you or your gifts seriously.

*2 min silence, 2 min person A tell story, 2 min ask a question (and response) then
2 min person B story, 2 min ask a question (and response)*

Theological Reflection

Theological reflection is a key Christian spiritual practice. It lies at the heart of how Christians engage with the Bible in daily life, how we form and shape communities, and how we make sense of the world in which we live. This is not a practice only for Bible scholars, pastors, or experts, but can be done by anyone. Theology is about how we speak, understand, and wrestle with God and the holy in our lives and through the sacred stories that emerge. “Reflection” here suggests a mirror—looking back at ourselves and our surroundings through something outside of ourselves. And so, theological reflection, at its core, is simply “looking back at ourselves and our world through talk and images of God and sacred stories.”

Theological reflection is something that Christians and Christian communities practice over a lifetime, and it may be something you already do. However, at the heart of the practice, is another practice—reflecting and connecting—that is much simpler to learn. After this practice becomes familiar, try using stories of Scripture to connect to your story.

Practice: Reflect and Connect

Step 1: Think back on the songs, poems, stories, pictures, images, etc. that are or have been important to you in your life. They do not need to have “spiritual” or “religious” aspects to them. List some here:

Step 2: Pick one that “speaks to you” for whatever reason, or one that spoke to you in a particular stage in your life. Notice key words, lines, or images. Represent it here in some way:

Step 3: Explore what it is (or was) about this song/poem/story/etc. that connected so deeply to your life. Why is (or was) this important to you? What “gifts” might this bring to light?

Step 4: Try to bring to mind a specific moment in your own story that is the type of moment this song/poem/story/etc. connects to. Represent it here in some way:

Step 5: Imagine telling someone else about this song/poem/story/etc. and the impact it had in a particular moment in your life. How could you use your gifts to do that? Write what you would share:

Discerning and Using Gifts

“Do not ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman

God has created each of us with particular strengths and particular gifts—and each person’s are different. Central to the Christian understanding of vocation is a recognition that our gifts were not given just for our own use, but that God has given them to us for the sake of others—indeed for the whole creation. Discerning vocation is a process of discovering those God-given gifts that make you “come alive” and then finding way a way to use those gifts for the sake of those who need them. When we do this, we participate in the living Body of Christ. As St. Paul wrote to the Christian community in Corinth: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord... For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

In the practice of Discerning and Using Gifts we will bring together the practices we have learned thus far--Holy Listening, Testimony, Self Awakening Questions, and Reflect and Connect—as we seek to discover the next steps in using our gifts for God’s purposes.

Practice: Discerning and Using Gifts

Gifts Assessment: Before beginning this practice, take a “Spiritual Gifts Assessment” (a Google search will give you many to choose from). Review the results and think critically about whether they reflect your gifts or not—be open to being surprised by unexpected gifts! Pray over the list, and notice if God is drawing your attention to any gift in particular. Ask God in prayer what this might mean for you.

Holy Listening/Testimony/Self Awakening Questions: Find a partner and decide who will share first, and who will share second. You will have 2 minutes in silence to think, and then 2 minutes to share your story. The listener will then have 2 minutes to form and ask a Self Awakening Question (and listen to the response).

Tell a story about a time when you used one of your gifts in service of someone else

*2 min silence, 2 min person A tell story, 2 min ask a question (and response) then
2 min person B story, 2 min ask a question (and response)*

Self-Awakening Questions for Deeper Discernment: Sit in silence for several minutes reflecting on the story you have just heard. Pray silently for your story partner, and give thanks to God for their gifts. As you pray, listen for God stirring up a self-awakening question that might draw the person deeper into how they might be being called to use their gifts in new ways. The question may simply be: “How is God calling you to use your gifts in new ways.” Ask them whatever question emerges, and listen closely to their response. Then switch.

Reflect and Connect/Theological Reflection: As you were listening to your story partner, did you find points of connection to your own story? To your own gifts? Share those connections with them. Were there any songs/poems/artworks/scriptures that came to mind during this process? Did you notice the presence of God during this time? Share those connections with your story partner too.

For Further Reflection

When in your life have you made decisions that have impacted where your life would head from that moment on? What values influenced those decisions? Were those your values or someone else's?

At what points in your journey has God felt present? When has God felt absent? Looking back on your life now, do you have a new perspective on how God has been at work?

How has God revealed to you your gifts? Who has been part of naming those gifts for you? What else helped you discover what your gifts are and to put them to use?

Where do you find your deep gladness meeting the world's deep hunger? How does it feel when you use your gifts in a way that serves others?

What challenges present themselves as you reflect on your gifts and what you are called to do with your life? Who or what helps you get clearer? Who or what gets in the way?

What are the next steps for you in discovering your gifts and discerning your vocation?