# VocationCARE Approach

*Core practices for discerning vocation in Christian community*

lead | practice | enact

**VocationCARE Essentials**

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**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, AKA "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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# The Language of Vocation

"Vocation" comes the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a person is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Super-ego, or Self-interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

--Frederick Beuchner in Wishful Thinking

1. **Christians believe everyone is called by God and has a vocation—in fact many vocations.** There is an abundance of rich and diverse gifts within the body of Christ waiting to be discovered. Communities committed to caring for vocation foster a culture of noticing, naming and nurturing all the gifts people bring.

2. **Finding your vocation is not a process to find your one and only true calling**. Instead it an ongoing process of discernment of how best to use your gifts here and now—through work, family, hobbies, service, and all other aspects of your life. Vocations shift and change over time.

3. **The care for vocation is a communal and intergenerational practice.** The consistent witness of Scripture and our own experiences tell us that the discernment of call and care for vocation is done in the company of adults and young people within the community of faith. In every generation, we have a shared responsibility to care for vocation in all people.

4. **God's call is an inward/outward invitation to anticipate, listen and respond.** We are continuously invited to listen deeply to one another and together for God's call—and to support one another in faithful action to serve the common good and do God's healing work in the world.

5. **Change is created one room at a time.** When we convene people in intimate small groups, ask powerful questions and listen deeply to each other, we create the possibility to fulfill the church's mission in the world.

6. **A choice toward the future is distinct from the past.** When you get clear about your story, you are given the opportunity to write the next chapters of your story in a new way. Vocational discernment is a call to action that inspires us to make choices that say "yes" to a hopeful future. When communities care for vocation, particularly among young people, they plant seeds for a renewed, hopeful future and witness to God's reign.

7. **Storytelling is a process for discerning vocation.** Within each person there are many stories longing to be shared and heard. We use a story process as the primary means to discern, discover and clarify a sense of vocation or call—what people really love or care about—and what inspires them to act on behalf of other people finding their own vocation or sense of call.

8. **Our stories give us clues about our vocations.** As we learn to tell and listen to stories, we can notice themes and key moments where we made choices to go one direction or another. Moments of struggle and pain can be keys to unlocking our deepest passions—and can help us connect those passions to the deep needs of the world.

# Holy Listening

Holy listening is a way of inviting people to slow down, take a look around, and speak the truths of our lives out loud to one another. Testimony is the practice of sharing with honesty the stories that give meaning to our lives. These two spiritual practices – holy listening and testimony – work together as we create space to engage in vocational discernment.

**A quote by Douglas V. Steere, a Quaker writing in the aftermath of WWII England:**

> Have you ever sat with a friend when in the course of an easy and pleasant conversation the talk took a new turn and you both listened avidly to the other and to something that was emerging in your visit? You found yourselves saying things that astonished you and finally you stopped talking and there was an immense naturalness about the long silent pause that followed. In the silent interval you were possessed by what you had discovered together. If that has happened to you, you know that when you come up out of such an experience, there is a memory of rapture and a feeling in the heart of having touched holy ground

**When have you experienced this kind of listening?**

**How is Holy Listening different than how we usually listen?**

As Steere describes it, holy listening is very different from the common, every day listening we engage in most of the time. In most of our daily conversations, we listen to what is being said only enough to inject an opinion at the earliest possible moment. We listen with the "outer ear." With the rest of the mind, we are preparing our own speech.

In Holy Listening, the focus remains on the speaker as the listener practices a disciplined posture of care, hospitality, relaxed awareness, and attentiveness. In Holy Listening, the listener hones the capacity to "hear through many wrappings." She fosters a climate in which "the most unexpected disclosures occur that are in the way of being miracles in one sense, and the most natural and obvious things in the world in another."

Steere adds one more important mark of holy listening: "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." He reminds us that "over the shoulder" of the human listener there is the presence of the "eternal listener." 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. Our stories reveal our deepest truths, our deepest longings, our deepest needs. Creating a space for those stories to live and move is part of creating a community where we all have room to become who God is creating us to be.

## Testimony

The practice of Testimony works alongside Holy Listening as we create space for conversation around call, vocation, and finding our purpose.

**What is Testimony?**

Testimony is another word for story-telling. In using the word *testimony,* we advocate for revisiting ancient Christian practices with the hope of investing them with fresh interpretation by contemporary faithful people – us.

Testimony, in some church settings, means standing up to tell one's conversion experience or personal salvation story. This practice may include those stories but can also be seen more broadly. 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. As we enter a communal process of looking together for ways God is at work in our lives, our testimony grows richer and new understandings emerge. In this way, testimony becomes a practice we can do together, rather than a performance of internal work we have done alone.

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

**A quote from "Lives to Offer" by Dori Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer:**

Testimony refers not only to reporting on God's already-finished action in the world, but also includes the voicing of memories of an experience, event, or relationship that has been tucked into the seams of everyday living. When invited, these might pour forth and come into focus as significant testimony to God's activity in the small moments of life. 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.

### 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

The spaces we create for exploring vocation give us room to ask questions that will wake us up to our own lives, the life around us, and to the life of God. This may not be as easy as it sounds. Jesus asked people an important question: What do you want me to do for you? Sometimes he would do what they asked. But the question always invited Jesus' friends and followers to interrogate their lives and their deepest desires. It is not a question in the abstract. It is a question that comes to a person in a particular community and the response is lived out in community. It is a question that pays attention – to who you are and who you are becoming, to where you are and what is needed, to the presence of Jesus and the promises of God.

**A Quote from The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action, by Eric E. Voight, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs:**

> Questions can be like a lever you use to pry open the stuck lid on a paint can … If we have a short lever, we can only just crack open the lid on the can. But if we have a longer lever, or a more dynamic question, we can open that can up much wider and really stir things up … If the right question is applied, and it digs deep enough, then we can stir up all the creative solutions."

**What are Self-Awakening Questions?**

> Self-awakening questions are not always the questions we are in the habit of asking, but they become more habitual with practice. Self-awakening questions help us hear God's call or listen more attentively for God's presence. They are questions that emerge when our heads and hearts are open to the holy. They might occur in a sermon, in a one-on-one conversation, or a small group setting. When we practice asking self-awakening questions, we often frame them to invite metaphors or images that help the storyteller explore who she is, what she loves, and what she cares passionately about. They help the speaker walk around in his story long enough to remember risks, challenges, choices, and outcomes.

**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?**

**What keeps you from asking these sorts of questions of others (and yourself)?**

## Framing Self-Awakening Questions

Here are some helpful guidelines for crafting good questions:

1. The best questions are simple, brief and to the point.

2. They are questions that you could not anticipate the answers to and that invites the storyteller into deeper self-reflection on his or her faith, gifts and sense of call or meaning.

3. Avoid asking questions with right or wrong answers. Instead, ask "how," "what" or "why" questions because they tend to focus inquiry, stimulate reflection, touch a deeper meaning and generate curiosity in the storyteller when crafted well.

4. Explore questions that invite images or metaphors because they can open things up in ways that more direct questions don't.

5. Ask questions that help the storyteller to reflect on clarifying feelings, vivid images, passions, concerns, hopes and values as well as patterns and themes in his or her story.

6. Ask questions that help the storyteller to explore his or her inner realities—who am I—as well as the outward facts—what does he or she love, care about or value.

7. 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.

8. Watch the pacing of the questions, allowing some silence between the last answer and the next question. Questions that emerge too quickly and often may feel a little intrusive, cutting off the deep reflection that can help the storyteller.

9. Trust your intuition in asking questions. If you are not sure about a particular question, sit with it for a while and wait for clarity.

10. 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.

### 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

## AKA "Reflect and Connect for Meaning and Purpose"

Theological reflection is a key Christian spiritual practice. It lies at the heart of how Christians engage with the Bible in daily life, how Christians form and shape communities, and how Christians make sense of the world in which we live. While it is possible to study theology and pile up advanced degrees in theological reflection, this is not a practice simply for the experts, but can be done by anyone.

**What is Theological Reflection?**

The word theology comes from two Greek words: "Theos," meaning "God," and "logos," which has many rich definitions rooted in the concept of "word" or "speech." Some use these Greek roots to translate theology as "God-talk." Theology, or God-talk, is about how we speak, understand, and wrestle with God and the holy in our lives and through the sacred stories that emerge. The word "reflection" here suggests the image of a mirror—looking back at ourselves and our surroundings through something outside of ourselves as a way to better understand ourselves and our stories. 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."

**Where does Theological Reflection come from?**

As a practice, we find examples of theological reflection throughout history and in many traditions. As part of contemporary Jewish Passover observance, the story of the Exodus is retold—where Moses responds to God's calling to free the Hebrew slaves, and demands that Pharaoh "let his people go." But the story is not treated as if were merely some interesting incident in history. As the story is retold each year, the statement is made that "it was not only our ancestors whom God redeemed from Egypt, for if God had not redeemed our ancestors, then we and our children and our children's children would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt." The participants are invited to make a connection to their lives and reflect on what sorts of things "enslave" them today—and how God might deliver them from this bondage just as God did in the story of the Exodus.

In pre-Civil War America, enslaved people drew great strength from the story of the Exodus as well. As they struggled under the conditions of slavery, these stories of the ancient slaves that God rescued gave the people hope, helped them to make sense of their situation, and allowed them to find some concrete ways to put an end to slavery. Songs like "Go Down Moses" and "Deep River" give examples of how they made these connections. In the 20th Century, civil rights leaders such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King drew again on the story of God delivering the people from bondage in Exodus as a way of interpreting the struggle for racial equality. Dr. King's "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech in particular drew heavily on these themes and images—not just as helpful examples, but as a way of deeply reflecting and connecting the stories of the Bible to help the people make sense of their world today.

**How do you do Theological Reflection?**

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, and need not center on the stories of the Bible

## Practice: Reflect and Connect

Purpose: To practice reflecting and connecting (for meaning and purpose) through connecting a story from your life with something that helps you interpret it.

**Step 1**: Think back on the songs, poems, stories, pictures, images, etc. that are or have been particularly important to you in your life. These can be anything, and need not 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?

**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. Write what you would share:

After this practice becomes familiar, try using stories of Scripture to connect to your story.

## 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 different perspective on how God has been at work?**

**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 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 discerning your vocation?**

## Notes and Reflections