

CONSIDERING YOUR CALL AND VOCATION

To explore the definitions of Christian vocation and calling
To share with others one's own sense of call
To listen to the similarities and differences in others' calls
To provide a common understanding for future discussions

How do I know God is calling me? How can I respond to God's call? Does "vocation" include more than what I do to earn a living? Must I be ordained to live out my Christian vocation?

AN ESSAY FOR GROUP DISCUSSION: This resource is only an introduction to the topics of call and vocation, but can be used to initiate exploration and discussion. The rubrics (page 5) suggest a process for groups of four, but alternatives could be devised for different arrangements, including personal reflection. Experience indicates that persons in early inquiry have different issues and observations from those in later inquiry.

I

For Christians, VOCATION has a much deeper meaning than simply noting where one works...what one does...and how much one is paid. The word comes from the Latin *vocare* (to call, summons) which suggests that vocation is a calling from someone - to someone - for some purpose. As Christians, our VOCATION is focused on the call from God in Christ to us for living faithfully in who we are and what we do. Thus, VOCATION for Christians includes both our being and our doing as we respond to God's call and is expressed in our relationships and community, in our utilization of our God-given talents, and in our daily work. A Christian may be occupied at the same task as a non-Christian, but have a very different sense of call and purpose. The word VOCATION also invites us to reflect on the theological meaning of our chosen daily work / occupation / profession by emphasizing how we serve and give...rather than on what we receive for our labors.

Throughout history, people of faith have experienced a sense of call from God which has placed demands and opportunities on their lives. Sometimes this calling has been expressed in general categories to the community of faith: "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, NRSV). At other times, this calling has been quite specific:

"Go from your country..." (Genesis 12:1-4),
"Come, I will send you to Pharaoh..." (Exodus 3 & 4),
"Make the mind of this people dull..." (Isaiah 6),
"And now, you will conceive in your womb..." (Luke 1:26-56),
"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." (Matthew 4:18-22),
"...that I might proclaim [God] among the Gentiles..." (Galatians 1).

Whether general or specific...to community or individual...CHRISTIAN VOCATION includes both the summons from God...and the response by the one being called. Scripture records a number of those who heard and followed God's call, as well as several who turned away. Like the rich ruler hearing the call to "go, sell what you own...then come, follow me," (Mark 10:17-22, NRSV), there are those who have been unwilling to commit themselves to the risk and cost of discipleship...and have turned away from their calling.

II

Too often the societal demands for occupational success have overridden the call from God for vocational faithfulness. In the statement on "Christian Life and Work" from *A Brief Statement of Belief* the demands of discipleship are expressed in terms of our call to be servants of God in all of life. This statement says much about VOCATION for the Church, for the ordained ministry (ministers, elders, deacons) and for individual Christians:

Each Christian is called to be a servant of God in all of life, so that we must seek God's will for the work we do and for the manner in which we do it. Christian vocation may be found in any work where our own abilities and interests best meet the legitimate needs of God's world. The Church is charged under God with the obligation to seek out the most responsible and effective Christian leadership. It is the special role of the ordained ministry, including elders and deacons, to perform particular services in the life of the Church and to strengthen every Christian in the discharge of the responsibilities of the priesthood of all believers in the Church and the world. For [each] Christian, all life becomes significant as [we do our] daily work with dedication and diligence out of love for God and for [our] neighbor. (A Brief Statement of Faith, 1962, Presbyterian Church (U.S.))

The Reformed tradition has long held that God's call is neither limited to those who become Ministers of Word and Sacrament...nor restricted to occupational issues. All of God's people are called...and all of life is subject to that call. Thus, any person sensing a call from God needs to be open to the variety of ministries for which s/he has been gifted. The breadth of Christian vocation, including areas often overlooked, is declared in "The Directory for Worship" of the *Book of Order* (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)):

CHRISTIAN VOCATION

God calls a people
to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
to follow Jesus Christ in obedient discipleship;
to use the gifts and abilities God has given,
honoring and serving God

- in personal life,
- in household and families,
- in daily occupations,
- in community, nation, and the world.

A person responds to God's call to faith in Jesus Christ
through Baptism and
through life and worship in the community of faith.

Persons respond to God's call to discipleship
through the ministries of God's people in and for the world.

Persons respond to God's call to honor and serve God
in every aspect of human life

- in their work and in their play
- in their thought and in their action
- in their private and in their public relationships.

God hallows daily life, and in daily life provides opportunity for holy living.
As Christians honor and serve God in daily life, they worship God.
For Christians, work and worship cannot be separated.

Book of Order (W-5.600) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Every one of us needs to hear and remember this good news: God calls a people...to believe in Jesus Christ...to follow in discipleship...to use gifts and abilities in service..in personhood..household..daily work..community. This is our calling in all its complexity and possibility. And from this call to believe in, to follow, and to use...we must begin to discern the ways we can faithfully respond. We need to be alert to the variety and breadth of God's call.

Sometimes we inappropriately doubt our own abilities and question our sense of call. Like Moses who questioned his ability to speak before Pharaoh, saying, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else." (Exodus 4:1-15, NRSV)...and Sarah who laughed at the seeming impossibility of God's promise (Genesis 18:9-15)...and Isaiah who was overwhelmed by his own sense of unworthiness (Isaiah 6:5)...and Jeremiah who doubted his own maturity, declaring, "I am only a boy" (Jeremiah 1:4-10, NRSV)...people too often underestimate their abilities and overlook the recurring promise of God: "*Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you...*" (Isaiah 41:8-10, NRSV). As we are more aware of God's presence and power, we are enabled to claim God's call and say, "*Here am I; send me!*" (Isaiah 6:8, NRSV). Discerning our call and vocational response often requires much thoughtful and prayerful consideration. The process frequently evokes inner struggles, anxiety, and even doubt. To trust that God is in the midst of our struggles often provides the courage and vision to continue through the wilderness of this journey. Only then can we move beyond any success motivation which too frequently stifles our desire for faithfulness, raises the denial of our gifts, and breeds an unwillingness to trust God and a temptation to ignore our calling.

III

The process of discerning one's call is not an easy one, but we are helped by H. Richard Niebuhr's insight which subdivides the process into four components:

- The Call to Be a Christian
- The Secret Call
- The Providential Call
- The Ecclesiastical Call

(The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education, 1956, Harper & Brothers)

THE CALL TO BE A CHRISTIAN

is that universal calling to follow and serve Jesus Christ. Every Christian is summoned through baptism to the "priesthood of all believers." We all are called to minister and each of us must determine how our particular ministry will be faithfully carried out. Robert G. Cox declares: "It is really of little consequence whether you fulfill God's call through the ordained ministry or through the general ministry. What is important is that you respond in faith" (*Do You Mean Me, Lord?*, 1985, Westminster Press, p. 111). Are you aware of your own calling to be one of those who follows and serves Jesus Christ?

THE SECRET CALL

is that private calling to each person. It is not easily discerned and may even be confusing. For some it comes slowly, for others suddenly; for some it seems an obvious continuation of events, for others a life-changing transformation. The secret summons requires considerable time for prayer, inner wrestling, and dialogue with others before some clarity begins to emerge. This clarity may include the closing of one door as easily as the opening of another while one's sense of call emerges and changes. Are you aware of God's call for you to respond through the context of your daily life (*Book of Order W-5.600*)?

THE PROVIDENTIAL CALL

is that calling which emerges from considering one's God-given talents. Any secret call must be weighed against the abilities one has been provided. "*Is God calling me to be a lawyer or nurse, a social worker or minister, a homemaker or bricklayer?*" This is the time to test and evaluate whether you have the motivation and interest...the energy and talents...the intelligence and potential...to match the direction of your secret call. If these have not been provided, you may need to honestly re-examine your sense of call and consider another way to carry out your ministry for Christ. Are you aware of any specific direction of your call which is being shaped by your skills and talents?

THE ECCLESIASTICAL CALL

is particularly significant for Presbyterians seeking a call to ordained ministry. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) the *ecclesia* (the called ones, the church) functions as the community voice confirming or correcting an individual's understanding of his or her call. Presbyteries function actively in this process through the preparation, oversight, consultation, examination and the commissioning or ordaining of those considering professional ministry. Theological institutions guide and test the abilities of persons. Search Committees seek those persons whose abilities and skills match with the particular requirements of the position. And presbyteries ultimately decide on the total balance of the four different elements of one's call. For each person considering professional ministry, the awareness of a call to be a Christian, the inner urgency, the awareness of one's gifts, and a call from God's people to a particular function, all merge together to give substance and clarity to one's call. Are you aware of persons in your life who are confirming or correcting your own sense of call?

IV

Frederick Buechner offers another image which may help us discern our call. Listen to his definition of VOCATION:

There are all 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 Superego, 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 to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either.

Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

(Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, 1973, Harper & Row, p. 95)

When we think of our CHRISTIAN VOCATION we often will be drawn toward issues of occupation and daily work, but let us always pause to include all of our daily life. We respond to God's call in work and play...in thought and action...in private and public relationships. Only as we grasp the whole claim of our calling, can we respond fully and faithfully...and try to find that place where our "deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

*** For further study you might consider Roy Lewis' *Choosing Your Career, Finding Your Vocation*, 1989, Paulist Press, (Chapter 2: God and Vocation) for a longer historical, theological and biblical foundation of our work and vocation.

"CONSIDERING YOUR CALL..." IN SMALL GROUPS

A. PROVIDE TIME TO READ THE ENTIRE RESOURCE

Provide the paper, "Considering Your Call and Vocation" to participants prior to event, asking them to read the paper and to highlight those statements which are important as they consider their own call and vocation.

B. SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION (Groups of four...There may be some advantages in grouping participants according to their stage in the Inquiry Phase.)

60 minutes

1. H. Richard Niebuhr says that everyone receives a call to be a Christian...to follow and serve Jesus Christ (Reread Section III - The Call to Be a Christian).
Take a turn introducing yourself and describing your own call to be a Christian by sharing...

- *What circumstances and experiences do you connect with your own sense of call?*
- *Has your awareness of your call come gradually or suddenly?*
- *How long have you sensed your own call?*

2. Niebuhr says The Secret Call is that personal and private calling to each person (Re-read Section III - The Secret Call).

- *Do you sense a Secret Call which is different from the call to every Christian?*
- *If so, how is it becoming clearer?*

3. The Providential Call involves a testing of the Secret Call by trying to match the expression/arena of the Secret Call with one's actual or potential talents (Re-read Section III - The Providential Call).

- *What talents/gifts/skills do you have which are important for your Secret Call?*
- *How have you...and how will you...work at your Providential Call?*
- *Who has been important to you in helping to clarify your call?*

4. If someone were to ask you to explain CHRISTIAN VOCATION, what are the key points you would want to share? (Re-read Sections I & II.)

Is there anything in the paper (Sections I-IV) which surprises you...disturbs you...or encourages you?

C. BRING GROUPS TOGETHER

15 minutes

A brief time for questions and discussion.