

Called to Life: Reflecting on Vocation

Participant Guide

By Laura Kelly Fanucci

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Your Story of Vocation

What drew you to “Called to Life”? Why do you want to explore questions of vocation? Maybe you have always been interested in the meaning of your life or God’s purpose for each of us. Or perhaps you want to understand how our faith connects to our relationships, work, and identity.

No matter what brought you here, we hope this chance to reflect on your relationship with God will be a meaningful step on your journey of faith. Over the next few weeks, you and your group will consider **questions of vocation**:

- What is my vocation?
- How can I learn to listen to God’s call?
- How do I live out my multiple callings?
- What impact do my struggles have on my vocation?
- How is my vocation changing over my lifetime?

Through the **conversation, personal reflection, and prayer** of “Called to Life,” you can gain greater awareness of how, where, and why God is calling you. Your openness to this process and your willingness to reflect on the questions in this Guide will deepen your experience of “Called to Life.”

Each week you will use this Guide for a **simple prayer practice, a short reading, and several reflection questions** before your group’s meeting. You can bring the Guide with you to meetings to jog your memory about your reflections or to write down anything you want to remember from the group’s discussion. After each meeting, you will return to the Guide for another prayer practice and follow-up questions for reflection. An **online version** of the guide is also available. Please visit www.collegevilleinstitute.org/calledtolife if you would like to pray, read, and reflect through each session online or download the guide as a PDF.

Journaling your thoughts throughout this journey will let you look back and see how your understanding has deepened, how your assumptions may have changed, and where you are still seeking wisdom. The Guide will also introduce you to helpful resources for exploring further questions of vocation in your life. Once the “Called to Life” program has ended, you can keep using this Guide to add to your story over time as it continues to unfold.

We hope that this Guide will help you to share and explore **your own story of vocation**. As your eyes are opened to God’s presence around you, may the “ear of your heart” turn to hear God speaking in your life—the call of vocation.

“Listen with the ear of your heart.”

Rule of St. Benedict, Prologue 1

Lectio Divina: An Introduction

For each session of “Called to Life,” we invite you to spend time with the prayer practice of *lectio divina* before and after each group meeting. Return to the outline on this page when you pray with the Scripture passage for each session.

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Lectio divina, or “holy reading,” is an ancient practice from the Christian tradition, dating back to the early medieval era of prayerful study of Scripture in monasteries. Saint Benedict described the process of *lectio divina* in his “Rule of Saint Benedict” written around the year 500. *Lectio divina* is a slow, quiet, and thoughtful encounter with Scripture that has been used by Christians for centuries.

Reading and reflecting on the biblical passage three times provides time and space for God’s Word to move from our lips, into our minds, and finally into our hearts. Over time, our practice of *lectio divina* can become a practice of prayer that opens our eyes and ears to how God is speaking to us in our everyday lives.

...

- *Find a quiet place for your reflection. Begin in prayer:*
Lord, open my heart to reflect on your call in my life and for my life. Amen.
- *Read the Scripture passage aloud. Spend a few moments in silence reflecting on the passage. What word or phrase strikes you? Hold that word or phrase in your mind as you spend a few moments in quiet reflection.*
- *Read the Scripture passage aloud a second time, holding in mind the word or phrase that struck you when you first read it. What might God be saying to you through this word or phrase? Spend a few moments in quiet reflection.*
- *Read the Scripture passage aloud a third and final time. How might God be calling you to act through the word or phrase that first struck you? How might you respond to this call?*
- *Sit with the Scripture passage for another minute in quiet reflection and thanksgiving. Then close with a final prayer:*

Lord, open my heart to reflect on your call in my life and for my life. Amen.

Session One: The Meaning of Vocation

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future full with hope.
Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.
When you search for me, you will find me;
if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord.

Jeremiah 29: 11-14

Before our meeting: Thoughts for preparation

Using the outline of Lectio Divina found on page 4, reflect on the Scripture passage above. Then take a few minutes to reflect on each of the following questions. Journal your thoughts in the space below.

- When you hear the word “vocation,” what do you think about? Can you define vocation in your own words?

- What did you learn about vocation or God’s call as you were growing up? Has this concept changed for you now as an adult?

Going Deeper: What is the meaning of vocation?

The word “vocation” can mean different things to different people. The prophet Jeremiah used words like “plans” and “call” to describe how he understood God at work in his life. Today we hear words like “purpose” or “meaning” to describe the search for deeper understanding about our lives.

For some, vocation means a job or an occupation. For others, vocation means a calling to ordained ministry in the church. But in the Christian tradition, vocation is actually much bigger and broader than we might believe. Vocation is the **universal** call to discipleship that all baptized Christians

share. Vocation is also the **particular** call that God speaks to each of us in our own unique lives. So vocation is not reserved for just a few—it is something we all share.

But how can our vocation be **both general and specific**? How can our calling from God be something **universal** that we all share, as well as something **particular** to our own life? The everyday ways in which we live out the core truths of our faith reveal how this works:

- As Christians, we share a common call to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). But we answer this call not just by loving people in a general sense, but by caring for particular individuals around us: the spouse we have chosen, the child we are raising, the co-workers we work with, the neighbors next door.
- We also share a common call from God to “be fruitful” (Genesis 1:22). We answer this universal call by using our unique gifts, talents, and skills to do a particular kind of work or service in the world: gardening, banking, nursing, or painting.
- Christians are all called to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Rather than becoming missionaries in far-off countries, most of us respond to this call by setting examples of faith in everyday ways right where we live: we work ethically at our jobs, we reach out to a friend in crisis, we volunteer our time at a local food shelf.

In each example, we are all called by God in a general way to be men and women of faith. But as we hear this universal call in the particular contexts and circumstances of our individual lives, we naturally respond in specific ways. We shape our vocation in response to God’s call. Looking at all that our life embraces, we can see how the unique quality of our vocations is created by weaving together:

- **who I am called to be**—the core of my identity, as created by God and baptized in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit;
- **how I am called to live**—my commitments of lifestyle and relationships, whether marriage, parenting, the single life or vowed celibate life;
- **what I am called to do**—the work, service or activities that fill my daily life.

Our vocation is created by this unique constellation of our identity, our relationships, and our work. So our vocations—as both universal and specific callings—are lived out in particular ways in our homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, and churches: all the places where we are called and challenged as people of faith.

Questions for Reflection:

- Jeremiah speaks of God’s plans for us: “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future full with hope.” Do you feel that God has hopes and dreams for your life in a general sense, as a Christian? In any specific ways, as the unique individual you are in your particular context?

- Look back on the three-fold definition of vocation on page 6. Which of the three areas (who you are, how you live, or what you do) seems clearest to you in terms of your vocation? Which of the three areas do you wonder the most about? In which of the three areas do you have a sense of God’s presence in your life?

Exploring together: Discussion questions for group meeting

The following questions will be used in your first group meeting. Feel free to write down any thoughts about these questions before the meeting.

- What did you learn about vocation or God’s call as you were growing up? Has this concept changed for you now as an adult? How would you define vocation in your own words?

- What image do you have of the general call that we share as Christians? Where did you learn about this general call: from your church, family, Scripture, a pastor or teacher? Share one example of how you live out the general call of vocation in a specific way in your life—through a relationship you have, a kind of work or service you do, or an attitude you live out.

- Look back together on the three-fold definition of vocation (page 6). Which of the three areas (who you are, how you live, or what you do) seems clearest to you in terms of your particular vocation? Which of the three areas do you have the most questions about in terms of vocation or God's call? In which of the three areas do you have a sense of God's presence in your life?

After our meeting: Thoughts for further reflection

Now that you have begun to explore the question of vocation, take time to reflect on what you have learned and what questions still remain for you. Return to the Scripture passage on page 5 and reflect on it using the Lectio Divina outline on page 4.

After your Lectio Divina prayer, use the space below to journal about the following questions:

- What did you learn from the ways that others in your group defined or thought about vocation? What was similar in their understanding to your own? What was different? What surprised you about your group's conversation together?

- Jeremiah's words assure us that not only does God have plans of love and hope for us, but God also hears us when we call. Now that you are using *lectio divina* as a prayer practice, what questions do you want to bring to God in prayer about your vocation? What questions do you have about your general call to live as a Christian? About your particular callings of who you are, how you live, and what you do?

Session Two: Learning to Listen: Practices of Discernment

Then the Lord said,
“Go outside and stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will be passing by.”
A strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord—
but the Lord was not in the wind.
After the wind there was an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake.
After the earthquake there was fire—but the Lord was not in the fire.
After the fire there was a tiny whispering sound.
When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak
and went and stood at the entrance of the cave.
A voice said to him, “Elijah, why are you here?”

1 Kings 19:11-13

Before our meeting: Thoughts for preparation

Using the outline of Lectio Divina found on page 4, reflect on the Scripture passage above. Then take a few minutes to reflect on each of the following questions. Journal your thoughts in the space below.

- Elijah expected to find God in a powerful force of nature. Instead, God was revealed to him in a “tiny whispering sound.” Have you ever experienced God’s presence in an unexpected way? What did this experience feel like? What did it teach you about God?
- How do you think God communicates with us? Through other people, nature, music, events, prayer or worship, Scripture or other reading, the needs of the world, or our own thoughts or ideas? Name one or two ways you have experienced God communicating with you in your life. What message did God communicate to you?

Going Deeper: How can we hear and respond to God's call for our lives?

From the time we are children and teenagers, people ask us questions like, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” and “What are you going to do with your life?” Sometimes such questions seem exciting and full of possibility. Other times they feel oppressive and overwhelming. Yet at every stage of life's journey—at mid-career or at retirement, for example—we are full of questions about what to do, where to go, who to be.

How can we learn to see where God is leading us through our journey? How can we become aware of how God speaks to us, often in “tiny whispering sounds”? How do we understand what God wants for and from our lives? These are questions of vocation that call for careful discernment.

The process of **discernment** is a centuries-old Christian practice of personal prayer and reflection with others that examines our lives in light of what we know about God's hopes, dreams, and love for us. Discernment involves paying attention to our experiences in order to recognize God's presence. Where do we notice God at work— in our relationships, in our work, or in our everyday activities? What other voices around us are competing with God's voice or leading us towards selfish, even evil, inclinations instead of the good God wants for us? What patterns do we notice about how we make decisions: are we careful planners or do we simply fall into situations without much thought? How do we choose? Through discernment we consider our inner thoughts as well as our outward actions; we listen to ourselves, to others, to our community and our context.

The Christian tradition offers many **formal practices of discernment**. Ignatian spirituality uses a review of where God's presence is felt throughout the day (called the *examen*). Quakers gather “clearness committees” where a group helps an individual to discern God's voice within them and find clarity about a question or dilemma. The practice of *lectio divina* that you are learning from the Rule of Saint Benedict is another discernment process with a long history of helping Christians sort out God's voice from the many other voices that call to us.

But many people already have **informal habits of discernment**. Perhaps you have a trusted friend that you talk to about big decisions. Maybe you journal or pray or take long walks when you are wrestling with important questions. Your discernment practices are the ways you reflect on your life and make decisions based on what God reveals to you through your life:

“Vocation...comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.

...Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.

From Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*

We often think of God’s call as a voice that is heard. The word “vocation” comes from the Latin word *vocare* which means “to call,” and “calling” has traditionally been another term for “vocation.” And people often talk about discernment as “listening for God’s call” or “hearing God’s voice,” as in the stories in Scripture when God speaks from a burning bush (Exodus 3:1-4:17) or wakes someone with a voice in the night (1 Samuel 3:1-18). Yet it seems that most of us do not experience God’s call through a booming voice from heaven that tells us where to go or what to do. Instead, we are called by God through the people and places, the events and the encounters, the challenges and the changes of our everyday lives. God communicates with us through conversations and questions, through friends and family, through our own hopes and thoughts. Maybe we feel “pulled” or “drawn” towards one decision instead of another. Perhaps we see signs or feel led down a certain path. These can all be ways that God reveals our vocation to us.

And vocation is not just God’s call to us; it is also our response to God. We call on God in turn as we struggle to figure out where and how to live out our vocations. Discernment practices are valuable for questions of vocation because they help us develop habits for exploring our relationship with God. While it takes effort and patience to learn how to look and listen for God, such habits of discernment can help us during times of doubt, fear or anxiety about our vocations. Making time and space for discernment can open our ears and our hearts to find God in the “tiny whispering sounds” of our lives.

Questions for Reflection:

- What do you expect a call from God to look like? Feel like? Sound like? Where do you think this idea or image came from? Does it match your experience of how God works in your life?

- Have you ever felt God guiding you towards certain decisions or away from others? What words would you use to describe how God worked in such situations? (For example: pushing, pulling, leading, hinting, drawing, nudging, pursuing, or converting.)

- Think back on the last important decision you made. What or who helped you come to the choice that you made? What voices did you listen to as you worked through the decision: yourself, others, God? How did you sort through these different voices? What might you like to change about the way you make decisions in the future?

Exploring together: Discussion questions for group meeting

The following questions will be used in your next group meeting. Feel free to write down any thoughts about these questions before the meeting.

- What do you expect a call from God to look like? Feel like? Sound like? Where do you think this idea or image came from? Does it match your experience of how God works in your life?

- Share a story of a time in your life when you felt drawn to a decision, a relationship, or a job. What did this experience feel like? What did you learn about yourself? About God?
- Does your faith influence how you make major decisions related to your vocation—in terms of relationships or work and other activities, for example? If so, in what ways? If not, why not? Share an example of a time that your faith impacted your decision-making.

After our meeting: Thoughts for further reflection

Now that you have begun to explore practices of discernment for vocation, take time to reflect on what you have learned and what questions still remain for you. Return to the Scripture passage on page 9 and reflect on it using the Lectio Divina outline on page 4.

After your Lectio Divina prayer, use the space below to journal about the following questions:

- Conversation with others can be an important part of discernment. What did you learn from other people’s descriptions of how God communicates with us? What was similar to your own experience and what was different? What surprised you about the way people spoke about their understanding of God’s call or how they make decisions related to vocation?
- Can you now name some practices of discernment—whether “formal” prayer practices like those described on page 10 or informal habits—that have helped you make decisions in the past? What discernment practices are you interested in learning more about? (See the

Suggested Resources list on page 30 for more information about Ignatian, Quaker, or Benedictine discernment practices.)

- Based on your personal reflection and your group's discussion, what questions do you now have about God as the one who calls each of us to our vocations?

Session Three: Many Callings, One Life

I therefore...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-6

Before our meeting: Thoughts for preparation

Using the outline of Lectio Divina found on page 4, reflect on the Scripture passage above. Then take a few minutes to reflect on each of the following questions. Journal your thoughts in the space below.

- Make a list of your various roles and relationships (for example: spouse, parent, friend, neighbor, employee, volunteer, church member, etc.). To what extent do you feel called to these different relationships and roles? Who are you called to be within these roles and relationships?
- Do you feel a sense of unity in your vocation? If so, what unites your vocation? If not, why not? Are there influences in your life or forces around you that work against feeling a sense of unity within your vocation?
- Do you experience your life as one calling or as multiple callings?

Going Deeper: How do we live out our vocation in multiple ways?

Many people today feel pulled in numerous directions, stretched beyond their limits. The responsibilities and obligations of work and family press on us from all sides, each area of our life demanding more time and attention than we have to give. Our world is increasingly fast-paced, ever-changing, and we struggle to keep up. How can we find a sense of centeredness and peace amidst all these pressures?

The challenges we face in living out multiple callings can spring from the **three-fold nature of our vocation: who I am called to be, how I am called to live, and what I am called to do.** (All the different roles and relationships that you listed on page 15 likely fall under one of these categories, if not two or three.) Tension between our identity, relationships, and work often leaves us feeling scattered. For example, we may struggle to stay faithful to our core values and beliefs when we are in the workplace or in relationships with certain people. Our commitments to family may detract from or directly conflict with our responsibilities at work.

Some people respond to these competing demands by **compartmentalizing** their lives. But it can be frustrating to feel like a different person at work than we are at home. Many people want a deeper sense of authenticity instead; they do not want to lead divided lives. All our callings—our various roles and relationships—reveal something about where we invest our time, our energy, and our love. We want them to feel **connected and integrated.**

Magazines, websites and TV shows offer advice on how to achieve a greater sense of balance in our lives. But for Christians, the concept of a “**centered life**” may provide a helpful alternative to trying to seek a perfect balance between our multiple callings: As Jack Fortin, the author of *The Centered Life*, writes:

“Some social commentators have suggested that the answer to the divided life is a balanced life. Although they have some valuable things to say, I find that the balanced life is finally a myth; it can’t be done. In a balanced life, I try to stay in control of my life and try to find ways to balance the various facets of my life: work, family, personal care, friendships, community life, and political involvement. The problem with this is that it keeps us self-absorbed, and the elements of our lives rarely stay in balance. Think of what happens, for example, when you have a sick child. Your goal then is not to maintain a balance, but to take immediate care of that child.

The alternative to a balanced life is a faithful life. It is a life faithful, moment by moment, to the God in whom we live and move and have our being. It is a centered life. The perfect example of the faithful life is Jesus Christ. Jesus often worked long hours despite the

objections of his disciples, and at other times he withdrew from people and tended to his own needs for rest, reflection, and prayer.

...A life centered in the triune God gives identity and a place to stand in a chaotic and compartmentalized world. The Creator God is present in all I do. Christ is the example and provides the means for how I am to live and love in God's world. The Holy Spirit is the voice within me that guides the way I live. With God as the center of my life, I know *whose* I am and can begin to discover *who* I am."

From Jack Fortin, *The Centered Life*

While the three-fold nature of our vocation can sometimes feel like it is pulling us in multiple directions, there can also be life-giving energy found within the numerous ways we are called. When we use our God-given gifts to serve the needs of those around us or when we live out the faith at the heart of our identity as we work in the world, we can experience a deep sense of joy or gratitude for the many people and places to which we have been called. This is how it feels to be **centered in our vocation**: to recognize that we are called by God to many different relationships, commitments, and work, but that we are also called to live as the same beloved child of God within these multiple callings.

Searching for a sense of unity or centeredness in our vocation is never simple. The relationship between our multiple callings changes throughout the seasons of our lives, from times of tension to moments of harmony. But ultimately our vocation is about our "one faith" in the "one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all," as Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians. Keeping our trust and hope in God at the center of our many callings is a constant challenge but is an effort shared by all who seek to live a life of faith.

Questions for Reflection:

- Look back over the list that you made of your multiple callings. What are the relationships between these different callings? Are some in harmony or are they in competition with each other? How do the relationships between your callings impact the rest of your life?

- When you feel tension between different callings within your life, how do you react? What responses have you found to be most helpful? Least helpful? Have you ever brought these concerns to God in prayer?
- When or where do you feel most centered? When you start to feel “off center,” what helps you to find your focus again?

Exploring together: Discussion questions for group meeting

The following questions will be used in your next group meeting. Feel free to write down any thoughts about these questions before the meeting.

- How do you experience your vocation: as one calling or as multiple callings? Are there influences in your life or forces around you that work against feeling a sense of unity within your vocation?
- Looking at the list of multiple callings that you compiled, what are the challenges that come with multiple vocations? What are the joys? Share a story of a situation that illustrates one of these challenges or joys.

- How would your life look differently if you tried to live a “centered life” instead of a “balanced life”? What might need to change as you work towards keeping God at the center of your multiple callings? What help do you need in this effort?

After our meeting: Thoughts for further reflection

Now that you have begun to explore the idea of multiple callings, take time to reflect on what you have learned and what questions still remain for you. Return to the Scripture passage on page 15 and reflect on it using the Lectio Divina outline on page 4.

After your Lectio Divina prayer, use the space below to journal about the following questions:

- What did you learn from others’ stories about living out their multiple callings? Did any of the callings people shared surprise you? What common concerns or struggles do you share with others in the group about dealing with the demands of multiple callings?

- Paul encourages the Ephesians to have patience, humility and gentleness as they strive to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” What attitudes do you want to bring to the challenges you face in living out your multiple callings? Where can you turn for support in this effort?

- What do you imagine that God hopes and dreams for you, in calling you to many different kinds of relationships, roles, work and service that make up your vocation?

Session Four: Struggles in Vocation

Then Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Mark 8:31-35

Before our meeting: Thoughts for preparation

Using the outline of Lectio Divina found on page 4, reflect on the Scripture passage above. Then take a few minutes to reflect on each of the following questions. Journal your thoughts in the space below.

- Think of someone you know—a friend, a family member, a co-worker—who has faced significant struggles or suffering in their life. What have you learned from their example?

- During times in your life when you have faced challenges or felt overwhelmed, did you experience God's presence or absence? How did this feel? How did God's presence or absence affect your faith or your prayer?

- What does it mean to you to "take up your cross"?

Going Deeper: How do we make sense of the suffering and struggles in our vocations?

All of our lives are touched by painful experiences, times of challenge, or significant loss. Because difficulty and struggle are part of the human condition, our vocations are shaped by suffering. And because Christ's own passion and death transformed human suffering, we are called as Christians to consider our hardships in a new light.

The challenges we face may be **physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual**. We may struggle with our health: disabilities, disease, mental illness or addictions. We may struggle with our families: estranged relationships, abuse, or divorce. We may struggle with work: job burnout, ethical dilemmas, or financial difficulties. We may struggle with loss: of a loved one, an opportunity, an ability or a dream. We may struggle with our faith: where is God in this mess and chaos? Is this part of what God is calling me to?

Returning to the three-fold definition of vocation from the first session (page 6), we can see how our vocations are affected in profound ways by painful experiences. Who we are, how we live, and what we do are all impacted by situations of stress or struggle. And pain or loss in one of these areas of vocation—**our identity, our relationships, or our work**—impacts the others in turn. For example, hardships related to our job can impact our self-esteem and sense of identity as well as our relationships with family and friends outside the workplace.

One perspective that may help us understand struggles related to vocation is to consider *how* God may be calling us. We may be **called within** a difficult situation: to act in a certain way or to have a particular attitude. Even if we cannot change the circumstances, we can respond in ways that allow our vocation to flourish. For example, people suffering from serious illness can surprise their families and caregivers with the positive perspective they are able to develop—virtues of compassion, patience, or gratitude. At other times we are **called away from** a situation—whether an abusive relationship, a toxic workplace, or a negative environment. Though it can be painful to leave, God sometimes calls us to do the difficult work of closing a door and moving on.

We may also be **called for** something, as we come to see a purpose greater than our own comfort or happiness. Perhaps we can become a companion or mentor for others grappling with the same difficulties—depression, chemical addictions or eating disorders. Similarly, we can find ourselves **called to** a new part of our vocation as a result of loss or difficulty, as our eyes are opened to a new possibility, opportunity or way of thinking. For example, a couple who has lived through years of infertility may find themselves called to adopt or foster a child. Experiences of pain or loss can bring

a deeper sense of empathy with others or gratitude for other gifts we have received. Victims of natural disasters like floods, tornados or hurricanes often realize that the basic fact of their family's survival is all that truly matters. Or the loss of a job can remind us how grateful we are for supportive friends or neighbors.

Sometimes we are called **by** the suffering we experience. We feel moved to respond by doing what we can to change the painful situation or to bring new life from an experience of loss. For example, someone may change careers or take on a new volunteer opportunity once they have experienced the loss of a loved one or witnessed first-hand the suffering that comes from extreme poverty. God can work through our anger, frustration or sadness to create something positive.

“Pain and trouble often play a mysterious role in the unfolding of our callings. Experiences of personal suffering, or encounters with the pain of others, offer spiritual opportunities that have the potential to put us in touch with the sacred dimension of experience from which callings emerge: “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.”

From John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*

But at other times our suffering seems too painful or unjust to be meaningful. Our struggle to understand why this is happening to us may lead us to wrestle with God or even lose faith. These dark moments of questioning our vocation may change our understanding or image of God. For example, after a divorce, someone may wonder why or if God called them to marriage in the first place. When a child is stricken with a life-threatening illness, the parents may question how a loving God could possibly allow this to happen. These are deep challenges to our view of vocation and of God. But the obstacles we meet through such times of crisis may eventually be found to hold as much of God's presence as our joys and triumphs. Learning from our struggles as we reflect on what it means to take up our crosses and follow Christ is a central part of our vocational journey.

Questions for Reflection:

- Look back on your list of multiple callings (page 15). Think of an experience of pain or loss that impacted one of these callings. How did this experience change the relationship, the work or the way of being that this calling involves? What did you learn from the experience of pain or loss?

- Draw a picture of a river that represents your life's journey thus far. Where are the twists and turns in your river? Where are the boulders or the rapids? What do these obstacles represent?

- Can you think of a time that you felt called **within** a struggle? **Away from** a difficult situation? **Towards** something new? **For** a deeper purpose than you first thought?

Exploring together: Discussion questions for group meeting

The following questions will be used in your next group meeting. Feel free to write down any thoughts about these questions before the meeting.

- Describe how it felt to draw the picture of the river that represents your life's journey so far. (If you wish, you may show your drawing to the group.) Was this exercise easy or difficult? What surprised you about the picture that emerged? Did it reveal anything new to you about the struggles and challenges you have encountered?

- Share a story of an experience of difficulty, loss, or challenge that impacted one of the callings you discussed at the last group meeting. What was your relationship with God like during this time? How did this struggle shape or change your understanding of your vocation? How did this experience affect your relationship with God?

- Share an example of a time that you felt called **within** a struggle, **away from** a difficult situation, **towards** something new, or **for** a deeper purpose than you first thought. What unexpected opportunities, deeper awareness, or new gifts did this experience hold for you? Does it surprise you now to view this painful experience as meaningful in a new or different way?

After our meeting: Thoughts for further reflection

Now that you have begun to explore questions of suffering and vocation, take time to reflect on what you have learned and what questions still remain for you. Return to the Scripture passage on page 20 and reflect on it using the Lectio Divina outline on page 4.

After your Lectio Divina prayer, use the space below to journal about the following questions:

- We don't often share the shadow sides of our stories with others. How did it feel to share a story about an experience of pain or loss with your small group? What did you learn from the stories that others shared?

- How does reflecting on times of loss, suffering, or struggle change your understanding of vocation or of your relationship with God? Does this change your understanding of what it means to "take up your cross" and follow Christ?

Session Five: Vocation Over Time: Living Our Changing Callings

My child, from your youth choose discipline,
and when you have gray hair you will still find wisdom.
Come to her like one who plows and sows, and wait for her good harvest...
If you are willing, my child, you can be disciplined,
and if you apply yourself you will become clever.
If you love to listen you will gain knowledge,
and if you pay attention you will become wise.

Sirach 6:18-19, 32-33

Before our meeting: Thoughts for preparation

Using the outline of Lectio Divina found on page 4, reflect on the Scripture passage above. Then take a few minutes to reflect on each of the following questions. Journal your thoughts in the space below.

- When you were a child or a teenager, how did you picture your life would look at the age you are today? What looks the same and what looks different than you imagined?
- Name a commitment that is part of your vocation. (For example, your commitment to a profession, to a spouse or partner, to your children, etc.) How has this commitment changed since you first entered into it? What do you imagine it might look like 10 or 20 years from today?
- Thinking back on the picture of the river that you drew in the previous session, draw a new picture of the river going forward from today. Where do you imagine it will flow or turn? Will it speed up or slow down? What new directions might it take?

Going Deeper: How do we live out our vocations over a lifetime?

Our vocation is not simply a plan for our future, a divine blueprint to tell us where to go and what to do. Instead, our vocation is a reality we live out in the day to day, here and now. While we all go through times of intense vocational questioning—for example, the years of young adulthood when we make major life decisions about work, school, and relationships—we never stop discerning our vocations as we grow. As a young person, we may have thought that one day we would “have it all figured out,” but in fact questions of vocation never cease.

Vocation is a **dynamic reality that evolves throughout the length of our life**, from youth through middle age, from retirement through the elder years. Each stage of life brings new challenges and callings: when we start school, finish college, take a first job, become parents, switch careers, enter retirement, lose a spouse, or enter assisted living. All aspects of our vocation can change over time: our work, our relationships, and our identity. But we are not left alone to navigate these transitions. As our guide and partner in vocation, God accompanies us through each changing stage of life and continues to call us to new work, new relationships, and new aspects of our identity.

“Vocation, then, is not a rigid appointment, determined once and for all. Rather, it entails choices at every life stage, new opportunities to enter more deeply into one’s created being and to respond more fully to God in the concrete circumstances that present themselves. This is not to say that vocation does not involve permanent commitments. It can and often does. Yet at each life stage one chooses again to live those commitments—and how to live them well.”

From Claire Wolfeich, *Navigating New Terrain: Work and Women’s Spiritual Lives*

The lifelong journey of living our God-given vocation is not a puzzle to be figured out once-and-for-all. Instead, vocation involves a willingness to enter into an ongoing dialogue with God that is always evolving. And since God often calls us through other people or communities, we are constantly being invited to respond to our changing contexts and circumstances, the changing needs of the world, and new opportunities that come our way. Across our lifetime, the people and the communities who call us will change—from parents and teachers to friends, family, co-workers, neighbors and even strangers. Our willingness to hear these changing calls and to respond with openness, creativity, and love is a sign of our growth in vocation.

As we grow into our callings, we learn that vocations are rarely a straight line from point A to point B. Instead, most people's lives take many twists and turns, stops and starts, in terms of vocation. We may have seasons when our sense of calling feels strong and other periods when we feel lost or confused. Sometimes one calling may end and a new one begins; sometimes we may have to say "no" to an opportunity that arises. There are numerous transitions within our vocations themselves: our friendships mature, our marriages go through stages, our careers shift. But all these changes—and the questions, doubts, fears and joys they bring—are part of vocation. As we continue the everyday work of living, we may come to see that there are many ways in which we can serve God and others through our many callings, our whole life long.

Questions for Reflection:

- Describe a time when you felt challenged by a transition you went through in terms of vocation. What questions did you have about yourself during this time? About God?
- Describe a time when you felt affirmed or renewed in some aspect of your vocation. How did this experience feel? What did you learn about yourself, your gifts, and your abilities?
- Where do you feel **called in** your life at this point? Through what people or communities is God calling to you at this time in your life? Do you have a sense that God is calling you **away from** something or **towards** something new?

Exploring together: Discussion questions for group meeting

The following questions will be used in your next group meeting. Feel free to write down any thoughts about these questions before the meeting.

- When you were a teenager or young adult, asking “What am I supposed to do with my life?” what influences shaped your decisions about work, school, relationships or other aspects of vocation? If you were to ask the same question of God today—“What am I supposed to do with my life?”—how do you think God might reply?
- What significant transitions have you gone through that shaped your vocation? What changes or turning points lie ahead of you now?
- In what areas of your life do you feel restlessness or uncertainty right now? In what areas of your life do you feel excitement or joy? Are there places you feel God might be leading you towards or away from? What communities or people are calling to you at this time in your life?
- How has your understanding of your vocation or the idea of God’s call changed after our time together in this group? What new insight about vocation will you take away with you from this experience?

After our meeting: Thoughts for further reflection

Now that you have begun to explore how vocation evolves over a lifetime, take time to reflect on what you have learned and what questions still remain for you. Return to the Scripture passage on page 25 and reflect on it using the Lectio Divina outline on page 4.

After your Lectio Divina prayer, use the space below to journal about the following questions:

- When you look at the picture you drew of your river flowing forward, what wisdom would you like to gain in your later years? What would you like to look back and see when you reflect on your vocation in 10, 20 or 30 years?
- After spending these past weeks reflecting on vocation, what new questions do you have about God's call? What understanding are you still seeking about your own vocation?
- What new resources or practices of prayer have you learned about that could help you continue to explore your vocation and relationship with God?

Suggested Readings

*Suggestions for further reading on **vocation**:*

- Jack Fortin. *The Centered Life: Awakened, Called, Set Free, Nurtured*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.
- Jennifer Grant Haworth. "Discerning God's Call" in *On Our Way: Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life*. Edited by Dorothy C. Bass and Susan R. Briehl. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2010.
- John Neafsey. *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.
- Parker Palmer. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

*Suggestions for further reading on **discernment**:*

- Esther de Waal. *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984.
- Mary Margaret Funk. *Lectio Matters: Before the Burning Bush*. London: Continuum, 2010.
- Elizabeth Liebert. *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

The "**River of Life**" activity in sessions 4 and 5 is adapted from Joyce Mercer's "The River of Life: A Life-Review Activity" in the appendix of *Girl Talk, God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls—And Their Parents*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008.