

Discernment of Christian Vocation

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7 (NRSV)

Christian vocation refers to more than pastoral ministry. In its broadest sense, vocation encompasses everything that forms us for a life of faith. John Calvin called vocation “the principal part of human life and the part that means most to God.”¹ The 207th General Assembly (1995) described it as “a lifelong response to God in all aspects of one’s life.”² The best definition may be that of theologian Frederick Buechner, who said, “The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”³ Discernment of vocation is, therefore, a logical starting point for much of the work undertaken and coordinated by the General Assembly Council (GAC).

While many GAC offices work with youth and young adults, since the elimination of such offices as Christian Vocation and Enlistment Services in the 1990s, relatively little work has had vocational discernment as its primary focus.⁴ There is widespread concern that as a church we do not do well at helping individuals discern a call, assess their gifts or consider the variety of paths for serving God in their life’s work. The experience of presbyteries and seminaries indicates that many of those preparing to become Ministers of Word and Sacrament have never been exposed to the important Reformed theological concept of Christian vocation. In some cases such exposure might well have led them to explore other paths of service more satisfying and appropriate for them. Ideally, through Sunday school and confirmation curricula, youth activities, discernment events, Presbyterian colleges and campus ministries, mission experiences, even worship and prayer, every Presbyterian would be invited to consider these questions:

- Who is God calling me to be in Christ in all that I am and all that I do?
- How am I to use the gifts and talents that God has given me for building up the body of Christ and witness to Christ’s presence in all of life?

¹ John Calvin, trans. ed. By Benjamin Wirt Farley, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 78.

² Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, *God’s Work in Our Hands: Employment, Community, and Christian Vocation* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly), 18.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 95.

⁴ The Office of Christian Vocation and Enlistment Services produced “This Call’s for You,” a workbook for congregations, in conjunction with the Advisory Committee on Christian Vocation Awareness. Recent editions of the “We Believe” curriculum, produced by the Office of Congregational Ministries Publishing and Christian Education, and some Presbyterian Youth Connection resources and events have focused on vocation. In 2006, a new GAC staff position of Associate for Certification and Christian Vocation was created. The person called to this position will devote at least 50% of his time to coordinating and developing this work.

The GAC identified “Leadership and Vocation” as one of the priority goals in its 2005-2006 Mission Work Plan. This goal was expressed as follows:

We are called to lead by Jesus Christ’s example, to identify spiritual gifts, and to equip and support Christians of all ages for faithful and effective servant leadership in all parts of the body of Christ.

One objective of this goal was to “encourage Christian vocation, especially among young people.”

Under the title “Discernment of Christian Vocation,” a staff project team was formed to devise a plan for achieving this objective. The team was given the goal:

to identify, assess, focus, and coordinate initiatives for Presbyterian youth and young adults on discernment of Christian vocation through resources, conferences and direct mission involvement with intentional multi-cultural inclusion.

The project team met from August 2005 through August 2006, during which time the GAC adopted, and the 217th General Assembly (2006) approved, a new Mission Work Plan for 2007-2008. The new plan contains the following objective:

Equip presbyteries and congregations to help members discern that their vocation is a call from God to Christian witness in society and the church.

The new plan identifies the following outcomes for measuring the success of this objective:

- More Presbyterians who understand and live out their vocation, whatever it may be, as a sacred call from God
- More Presbyterians discerning a call to leadership in the church, particularly (as) Ministers of Word and Sacrament serving congregations

In April 2006, the GAC took the additional step of incorporating the Pastoral Leadership Search Effort (PLSE), a vocational project funded initially by the Lilly Endowment through the Fund for Theological Education, into its work as a tool for connecting youth and young adults with PC(USA) vocational discernment programs. The name of this initiative has since been changed to the Presbyterian Leadership Search Effort in keeping with the broader definition of vocation that seems to be emerging in many parts of the church and beyond.

Findings and Conclusions

In response to the task presented by the GAC, the project team engaged in its own discernment process to determine the best means of accomplishing the ultimate goal of making disciples. It reviewed resources related to Christian vocation, monitored a pilot

discernment event among Young Adult Volunteers (YAV) and met with people currently engaged in vocational programs for high school and college students. From these activities the team concluded that meeting the GAC's objective required more than a programmatic response. As part of this broader response, the team agreed that a way must be found to redirect the church's attention and reframe some of the issues that confront our denomination in terms of Christian vocation.

The Presbyterian Church must recover and restore a culture of vocation that is not limited to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament but broadened to encompass all the ways people use their gifts and talents in living out their baptism. Creating faithful disciples, who see their life's work as a witness to Christ, is the end result. Such a response can be resourced by national and regional church bodies and related entities (colleges, campus ministries, seminaries, foundations, camps and conference centers, etc.) but must be led by congregations. Recapturing this culture is necessary if Presbyterians are to remain faithful to the promises we make at baptism, including the promise to nurture those whom we baptize in all aspects of the Christian life. Because all aspects of Christian life are grounded in baptism, it is an appropriate point from which to launch this renewed focus on vocation.

Specific findings and conclusions:

1. Vocational discernment is a systemic process in which the whole church must be engaged. Sharon Daloz Parks, a respected theologian and leading authority on vocational discernment for young adults, believes that young people need mentoring communities in all aspects of their lives in order to discern their vocation properly.⁵ Vocation as a theological concept, grounded in baptism and expressed through a variety of practices, involves congregations, presbyteries, Presbyterian-related national and international mission sites, partner organizations, Presbyterian colleges and universities, Presbyterian-related campus ministries, seminaries and others as mentoring communities.
2. Because the discernment of vocation for Presbyterians is not an individual activity, and because young adult exposure to Christian role models is formative, discernment events are an important programmatic element to be developed.
3. Experience with recent discernment events involving young adults who volunteer has shown that few are familiar with the language of Christian vocation including the practice of discernment. As the church works to reclaim a culture of vocation, language used to express this concept will be critical if the effort is to succeed. At the same time, refocusing attention on the discernment of vocation affords the church an opportunity to reclaim for all of its members the rich vocabulary upon which this concept is based.
4. Different cultures approach discernment of vocation in different ways. Such differences reflect not only different racial and ethnic backgrounds but different

⁵ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 158.

- economic, geographic, generational, gender and faith backgrounds as well. The church must be sensitive to these differences as it develops curriculum and other resources for youth, young adults, pastors, parents and others who work with young Presbyterians.
5. The General Assembly has established goals for increasing racial and ethnic membership. One challenge to achieving this goal is a shortage of racial and ethnic leadership. The church must be deliberate about identifying potential leaders and not just encouraging but enabling them to assume these roles.
 6. Because much valuable discernment takes place through service opportunities, service experiences are critical to this project. Existing programs for young adults in all parts of the church can be enhanced and focused to accomplish this. Two places where this is being done is through the Young Adult Volunteers (YAV) program and resources being developed for mission trip teams that will be available on the National Volunteers Office Web site.
 7. Because the college years are a formative time in a young person's spiritual development, and because colleges exist, in part, to prepare young people for their life's work, the church must find ways to help young people use this time for vocational discernment. This can happen in a variety of ways, beginning with helping students find the right college where they can explore and develop their gifts and through programs in which colleges can partner with congregations.
 8. The Lilly Endowment, through the Fund for Theological Education, has helped to establish some of the best programs focused on Christian and church vocation.
 - "Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation" (PTEV) helps college students examine the relationship between faith and career choice, provides opportunities to explore Christian ministry and enhances the capacity of colleges to teach and mentor students effectively in this arena. Nine Presbyterian-related colleges were among 88 schools that received PTEV grants.
 - "Theological School Programs for High School Youth" helps young people learn disciplines essential to the Christian life and encourages them to think theologically about contemporary issues and to consider vocations in Christian ministry. Two Presbyterian seminaries were among 48 schools that received money through this initiative.
 - "Volunteers Exploring Vocation" helps recent college graduates explore possible career paths geared toward serving others, including Christian ministry. PC(USA) currently participates through the YAV program.
 - "Calling Congregations" equips congregations with a variety of resources for nurturing vocational exploration and cultivating the next generation of pastors.

The GAC should find ways of linking with these and other programs so that the church can benefit from the experiences and resources they have generated.

Recommendations

The GAC cannot by itself accomplish the goal of restoring a culture of vocation in the PC(USA). It will require a coordinated effort of the whole church—congregations, presbyteries, seminaries, conference centers and others outside the church as well as pastors, educators, elders, and other individual Presbyterians. Recognizing that such an effort will not be concluded within the span of the 2007-2008 Mission Work Plan, the Discernment of Christian Vocation Project Team recommends that the GAC approve the following steps to encourage Christian vocation among young people and invite others to share in this important work:

1. Expand opportunities for discernment events, especially as a part of larger events involving middle and high school youth, college students and young adults.
2. Expand opportunities for youth and young adults to participate in service opportunities sponsored or coordinated by the PC(USA) or in partnership with other denominations and organizations.
3. Connect congregations and presbyteries that are actively engaged in vocational discernment activities and encourage them to connect with others by sharing their models.
4. Incorporate vocational discernment tools in curricula and other materials produced for middle school, high school and college students.
5. Identify or develop resources that present the concept of Christian vocation from a variety of ethnic and cultural perspectives.
6. Provide instruction for church educators, youth leaders and pastors on how to help students discern their call.
7. Encourage attendance at colleges and universities or participation in campus ministry programs that provide opportunities for vocational discernment.
8. Identify or develop resources to help pastors and congregations see vocational discernment as a fulfillment of promises made at baptism.
9. Encourage congregations to implement the five sacramental practices found in the report “Invitation to Christ,” approved by the 217th General Assembly (2006), and to reflect on these practices, considering how vocation is grounded in baptism and nourished in the Lord’s Supper.

10. Establish partnerships with seminaries, colleges, the Lilly Endowment and others that are engaged in programs of vocational discernment in order to learn from and share their findings and resources.
11. Establish a Web site to support all of the goals and recommendations above.
12. Establish a staff team from appropriate areas within the GAC organizational structure to implement these recommendations and report to the GAC regularly on the progress of implementation.

Recommendations in this report are meant to supplement other work funded under the GAC's goal of Leadership and Vocation. Funding to support these recommendations is assumed as the GAC allocates resources in accordance with the 2007-2008 Mission Work Plan. Consistent with the Mission Work Plan, it is further assumed that much of the work required to implement these recommendations will be done in congregations and presbyteries and through a variety of related entities.

Conclusion

The baptismal liturgy in the *Book of Common Worship* declares that members of the household of God are called by God to serve Christ in the world and to welcome all to this ministry. We urge the GAC to respond by affirming this report and, in doing so, to say to the whole church, "With joy and thanksgiving, we welcome you to share with us in the ministry of Christ, for we are all one in Christ."⁶

Respectfully Submitted, August 21, 2006

DISCERNMENT OF CHRISTIAN VOCATION PROJECT TEAM

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⁶ Theology and Worship Ministry Unit for the Presbyterian Church, *Book of Common Worship*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1993) 414.