



Windows OF Faith

8

Vocation

Preparation

Prepare a display featuring tools from various occupations (stethoscope, hammer, baton, chalk, gavel, veterinary syringe, baby bottle, lumber saw, police badge, hoe, wrench, pastoral stole, etc.). During the gathering time, invite participants to consider what each occupation does for the sake of the whole community—the role each plays to make life good for everyone. A major theme in this session is how gifts are given by God to benefit all rather than just the one who receives the gift.

Gathering

During the gathering time, begin to help participants see that discerning God's guidance involves paying attention to what they love, what they do well, the wisdom others can offer, and the working of the Spirit in ways which may be subtle but nonetheless powerful. You might use some or all of the following questions:

Listening to My Life

- If you could live anywhere, where would it be?
- In 10 years where do you hope to be?
- What do you believe is your best quality?
- During the past three years, what were the three things you did that were most life giving and rewarding to you? Think about those three things, what did they have in common?
- Recall a decision that, when you think back on it, was a good one. How did you make that decision? What were the important factors? How do you know it was a wise decision?
- Imagine your death bed. What have you done which allows you to die with a sense of peace and fulfillment?

Listening to Others

- Who might you look to for wise counsel as you think about the future?

What makes that person trustworthy?

- What do your closest friends and family think you should do with your life? What factors might influence their judgment, giving it a bias or particular clarity?
- Is there a consensus among your friends and family regarding your gifts and abilities? What do others most often need or desire from you?
- How are decisions made in your community (family, church, campus ministry)? How important to you is the guidance of a community?

Listening to the Holy Spirit

- What/Who is the Holy Spirit?
- Have you ever received life direction through a voice, angel, vision, or dream? Have you ever felt “filled with the Holy Spirit”?
- How do you most often experience the Holy Spirit's leading? How do you test whether God is indeed leading you to make a certain choice?

As a transition to the presentation, the leader might ask participants to react to the following story and quotation:

All of his life Tim had been going to church and knew that God loved him, had called him in Holy Baptism, and had important work for him to do in this world. He had been in a continuing conversation with his pastor about how to know the will of God for his life. Now he was 30 years old, married with three young girls, and still struggling to know the will of God for his life. He decided to sign up for a discernment seminar offered by his church and began to pray for direction from God with more fervor than ever before. When he showed up for the seminar, his pastor noticed that he was relaxed in the way he responded to the participants as they shared their own stories about what they were going to do with the rest of their lives. Finally it was Tim's turn and he said: “You know, all of my life I have wanted to do what God wanted me to do. I've asked over and over, ‘Lord what do you want me to do with my life?’ Then the other day, after I

signed up to do this workshop, I prayed again, ‘Lord, what do you want me to do with my life?’ And it was like the voice of God came down from heaven and said: ‘Well hell Tim, what do you want to do with your life? I’ve been working with you now for 30 years. Surprise me.’”

“Life’s a dance you learn as you go; sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow.”

- What does the image of life as a dance suggest about God’s guidance?
- If God said, “Surprise me” to you, would you feel more relieved or anxious?
- What does this story say about the idea that God has one perfect plan for everyone’s life?

Presentation

Waiting for Real Life?

In countries such as the United States and Canada, most people go to school for at least thirteen years. Many go on to four years of college, and some get additional education beyond that. This means that most of the first 20-30 years of our life is taken up with school, which often seems to be only preparation for the next grade level or the next type of school. We often have the sense that life as a student is not yet “real life.”

This was less of a problem in pre-modern times, when most young men began full-time work by age twelve to fourteen and most young women got married and began having children at about the same age. “Real life” arrived quickly. Preparation for “real life” was less likely to be formal education and more likely to be learning by working alongside parents and other adults.

The extended period of adolescence we experience today, with the sense that young adults are only preparing for something else, can rob us of what could be a very rich and fruitful time of our life. We can act as if we are not truly persons until we have graduated, gotten married, begun a career, or changed our present life in some other way.

Seen in light of our faith in God, the giver of life, it is foolish and perhaps unfaithful to devalue our present life by treating it as less than God’s good creation and merely as preparation for something else. But how can we avoid doing this?

God’s Ongoing Creation

If we look at things through a biblical lens we might note that God’s creative work didn’t only take place “in the beginning.” Rather, God creates constantly: “God created and still preserves” each of us and everything else, as Martin Luther wrote in his *Small Catechism*. This means that God relates to us in every moment, giving us life in our particular time, place, and unique circumstances. The Bible says that everyone and everything in our life is the result of God’s ongoing, creative work, (e.g. Psalm 104.)

You can see how this challenges the common perception that being a child or a youth or a student is only preparation for life and not “real life.” Whenever God gives us life, it’s real. The life of childhood and of being a student is valuable in itself and not only for what it might help us become. We already “are,” and the people and things around us are part of what God has created us to be. We may move or change or become different, but we do not have to become anything or anyone else in order to really live.

Marc Kolden, a theologian who has focused much of his study on vocation, tells a story:

Once when I was a graduate student, I had to pick up a famous

professor at the airport and bring him to a formal reception preceding a dinner at which he was to be honored. I made sure that I got him to the reception in plenty of time. In fact, we were so early that hardly anyone else had arrived. For the next half-hour, nearly all of those who arrived were elderly, since most of the other guests were just getting off work. I didn't recognize anyone who was there, but this famous professor seemed to talk with each one at some length and this continued even after the more well-known people arrived.

After the dinner, when I was taking the professor to his hotel, I expressed my surprise that he seemed to have known so many of the elderly people. He replied that he didn't know any of them. But it was his belief that there is something interesting about everyone, and he wanted to get to know people and find out what was interesting about each one. I think this was an astute insight, based on the Christian belief in God who gives all life. He took seriously the people around him and the opportunities for friendship, learning, enjoyment, and perhaps even service that existed. He lived in that moment and did not scorn it as merely preparation for the main events of the evening.

Another story:

The great physicist Albert Einstein had presented at a gathering of scientists from around the world and was arriving back in New York by train. Exiting Grand Central Station, an extravagantly dressed woman saw him and barked "Carry my luggage please!" She assumed he was a porter. Without a word, Einstein walked up to her, bent over, and carried her luggage to the waiting taxi.

Daily life is the place where God "calls" us to live faithfully by acting in ways that are responsive to the people and the situations in which we find ourselves. To put it most simply, when you have a person of faith plus a need to be met, you have a divine calling. It's God's world, and

God wants human needs met and society's suffering addressed. When the faithful see a need they can meet, they have a calling.

It gets more complicated, of course. There are many competing needs demanding our attention. Our abilities and training make us better prepared to act in some ways than in others. Sometimes we may know deep inside that God wants us to respond to some need, but we refuse to do so because we have other priorities. Then God may prod us (e.g., we need to do the work so we can eat) or lure us (e.g., by appealing to our need for recognition or a feeling of satisfaction) or call someone else. That does not say much for us, but it may get the need met.

How Does God Call Us?

How does God call people? How do we know if we are called? In some places in the Bible, God calls people in miraculous or mysterious ways: the boy Samuel heard a voice in the night (1 Sam. 3); Saul, the persecutor of the church, was blinded by a bright light and heard a voice (Acts 9).

More often, however, the call comes less directly: Someone asks us for help. A friend offers us an opportunity. A teacher or family member suggests that we should learn to do something. At the time, we may not think of it as God calling us, but looking back we realize God was acting through that person or opportunity in our life.

Of course, not everyone or everything that calls to us is a call from God. Television commercials, cultural values, other people's opinions, our own ego needs, destructive groups or movements, and many other things call to us very insistently, with attractive promises. We have to consider choices carefully in light of what we know of God and what is good, right, and true. Faced with a possible call we ask hard questions: Will answering this call meet a legitimate need? Will it be good for the earth, the poor, and the oppressed? Could God possibly want anyone to say "yes" to such a call? Could I, in good conscience, pray for God's guid-

ance and strength in doing what this call demands?

Some decisions are pretty obvious: if someone is drowning or has been hurt in a car accident, there is not much to decide. If we can help, we should. But when things are more complex or unclear, other members of the Christian community and trustworthy friends and family may be able to help us. We all know how easy it is to fool ourselves. Having others to bounce ideas off can be helpful. On the other hand, since God's ways often aren't our ways, we may not be helped by talking with others who are as confused as we are.

Tough choices call for prayer, study, and careful consideration. That's especially true when it comes to making decisions with lifelong implications, such as what sort of education I should pursue; whether to marry someone, and what sort of work I should seek. As big as these decisions are, think about how casually we often make them, and how frequently we make them with little thought to what God might need and want from us. But how do we discover what God needs or wants from us?

Discerning the Call in Our Abilities

Another way of thinking about where God might be calling us is to identify the abilities we have been given, the skills we have worked to improve, or our interests and commitments. If all life comes from God, then these things are part of what makes each of us God's creation, different from any other person.

Sometimes things we are good at may be used in harmful ways. Our interests may be petty and selfish. So it's important to look at our gifts in relation to the needs of the rest of God's world. We may be good at several things, but what do others need from us? We may have many interests, but some are more likely to guide us toward service which supports such things as justice, medical science, the environment, the church's ministry, or our families.

Factors beyond our control may make it difficult for us to do what we are good at or pursue our primary interests. In the midst of war, a poor economy, illness, the needs of family members, discrimination, and many other things God calls us into ways of serving we never anticipated. In fact, these unexpected calls may be more common than those which come through a more rational and methodical approach. That should not surprise us; God is always doing new things!

Most of us will have many divine callings, not just one. And we will have several at the same time, because they are embedded in our relationships, our neighbor's needs, our need to make a living, our being a citizen, and the movement of life around us and beyond our local community. Although they include our occupation, the words "calling" and "vocation" do not refer only, or even primarily, to our occupation, even if our society often uses the terms in that way (e.g., "Vocational Technical Schools"). If God is the God of all things, then there is no aspect of life that exists apart from God's concern. Our vocation is much larger than our occupation. Over the course of a lifetime we may be called to be many things: student, spouse, employee, soldier, taxpayer, grandparent, and volunteer.

When we dare to think about the whole picture, it gives more value to what we are doing now. It gives us the determination to stay the course in a difficult and lengthy time of preparation (e.g., medical school) because we believe that the goal is something to which God does call people, perhaps even me. It gives us the courage to work very hard to preserve and enhance a relationship, perhaps with a parent or a spouse, because we know that we are called to be faithful in such relationships. (Deciding what "faithful" means takes insight as well as courage and determination, of course.)

Thinking in terms of the big picture (acknowledging that this is God's world and that we are called to be faithful creatures in it) leads us to see

where things are wrong and need to be put right, even at considerable cost to ourselves. It leads us to take delight in many things we might otherwise take for granted: nature, a functioning political and social order, beautiful art and music, and the amazing diversity of people in this world. Reflecting on the big picture prompts us to thank God for all the good things we experience, to cry out to when we are suffering, to listen for God in the stillness of our prayers, and to offer worship to someone other than ourselves!

Beyond Being Autonomous or Heteronomous

Theologians make a helpful distinction in talking about human life. Modern persons often want to be “autonomous,” which literally means being “a law unto ourselves.” In contrast to “autonomous”, our lives may be “heteronomous,” which means controlled by “the law of the other.” This is the case in authoritarian societies or religions. For Christians, neither autonomy nor heteronomy is appropriate, since (1) absolute autonomy means rejecting God and making ourselves our own god, (2) if God is truly God, then no other entity rightfully dominates one of God’s creatures. The alternative stance is “theonomy,” in which we live in alignment with “the law of God”—which is how we are created to live.

A sense of Christian vocation or calling gives us a practical, biblical way of living in alignment with God’s will. Living as people called by God links us to God’s world as the context for all of our thinking and acting. We become aware of theological and ethical criteria for decisions. We understand things not only in terms of our past and present relationship to God, but also in terms of God’s intentions and promises for the future.

Viewing our life as aligned with God’s will and work, we begin to understand sin not primarily as wrongful actions but as the underlying condition that leads us to do bad things and omit doing good things. Martin Luther identified the underlying condition of sin as “unbelief” or lack of trust in God. This lack of trust in God makes us think that we can only

trust ourselves. Then we act shortsightedly or in light of a false understanding of who we are and what we are meant to be. This leads to self-destructive behavior as well as actions which are destructive to others.

Because sin is inevitable and serious, thinking only in terms of our earthly callings is inadequate. We have a prior, more important call: the call to believe in Jesus Christ and follow him. Jesus Christ is the revelation of the true God, whose will for us is that we trust God completely. When we do that we are freed from inappropriate trust in ourselves or other created things, freed also from undue anxiety, cynicism, pride, and hopelessness. We are set free to live in loving and just ways which show appropriate concern for ourselves and others.

Humans are not naturally trusting when it comes to God. This is overcome only when we hear the message of Jesus Christ, the one who lived out God’s trust-worthiness. Faith (trust) comes by hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ, who was trustworthy all the way to the death of a criminal. He bore the consequences of sin for each of us, giving us a new relationship to God, who raised Christ from death. Faith involves our “dying with Christ” so that we might “walk in newness of life” until the day we are raised with him for eternity. (See Romans 6).

When parents, friends, and leaders prove themselves over time to be faithful, to have our best interest at heart, we trust. Faith is the gift of the one who is trusted. In the same way, God is the one who works faith in the hearts of the “faithful”. “In God we trust” because we have experienced God’s faithfulness in the Scriptures, in history, in our communities, and in our lives. We are saved by grace, through faith, in God’s faithful work.

Our Primary Calling

The primary mission of the Christian church is to bear witness to Jesus Christ to all persons and all nations. The church exists for those who are

not yet believers. The ministries of the church, such as worship, education, nurture, works of mercy, and prophetic denunciation of sin and evil prepare disciples for lives of witness and service in the world.

Some Christians are called to be leaders within the church—pastors, teachers, musicians, deacons, youth ministers, counselors, and others who minister to the believers for the sake of the church’s larger mission to the world. It isn’t more pleasing to God to be a professional leader in the church than to serve in other useful callings, but it is necessary that some people answer the call to become professional leaders. God may call a person to consider service as a pastor or other rostered minister by unusual means, but ordinarily this call comes through one’s life as part of the Christian community. Other Christians may suggest that we might make a good rostered leader.

Here the leader may talk a little bit about the present need for rostered ministers. One example is the need for pastors in the Southwestern Synod of the ELCA. Within 9 years, 85 percent of its pastors will be of retirement age.

As with most calls, the call to rostered ministry needs to be tested over time and by experience as a believer in the service of God. It is important that a person be a good lay member of the church before she or he becomes a pastor or other leader. For lifelong Christians, some of this testing may take place during youth, so that answering God’s call to professional ministry occurs early in adulthood. For adult converts or persons returning to faith after several years, taking time to re-think the many aspects of one’s person and lifestyle is important before making such a significant move.

In every case, both regular involvement in a worshipping Christian community and faithful living in the callings one has already received are essential parts of considering a new call—whether that is a call to

become a professional minister or to change any of one’s other callings.

Some of you may be called to go to seminary. But most of you will proclaim the Word and offer Christ to the world in other, no less sacred, callings such as teaching, farming, manufacturing, business, law, construction, engineering, or as a mechanic.

Looking at the Christian life in terms of our callings in God’s world offers a way to love our neighbors wherever we are. How love looks is largely defined by our roles and responsibilities. Love is exceedingly concrete, taking form in many small, faithful actions. Love does not always look religious, but it is in serving the God who gives life that we discover what we are intended to be. That’s why our roles and responsibilities are indeed part of our divine callings.

Refreshments

Reflection

The reflection period for this session tries to move participants from general reflection on what it means to be called to discerning their gifts and deciding how those gifts might be best used in service to the community. Use the questions and sections below which seem most appropriate for your group.

Being Called

- * How did the presentation affect your understanding of what it means to be called?
- * Can you remember a time when you felt pushed or called to make a certain decision? What means did God use to lead you?

- * The presentation suggests that each of us has multiple callings (beneath our primary call to bear witness to Christ). What callings seem most pressing to you right now?
- * *Read Acts 9:1-19.* What does the story of Saul's Damascus road experience and its aftermath suggest about the relationship of conversion, call, community, and commissioning?

Calling and Occupation

- * What five occupations use the gifts that you listed on your coat of arms (week two)?
- * What job would you like to do for money? Why?
- * What job would you do if money were no object?
- * What are your greatest passions? How do the jobs you are considering allow you to express those passions?
- * Are there any jobs which might be totally inappropriate for Christians? Why?

After sharing the following story invite participants to reflect on what it says about understanding a job as a calling. You might suggest that for the called, a 'job' becomes a 'vocation'. The work provides its own motivation, its own reward and that living in the good work of God, we 'develop a taste' for good work.

A 19th century cabinet maker was asked to build an oak altar for the little church in his village. It was to be very ornate, with lots of little steeples, leaves, flowery things, arches, and gold trim. A few years ago, the church was expanded. When they took the altar apart, they found that the cabinet maker, without telling anyone, had made the gold arches and the carvings inside of the altar box as beautiful as the outside. The inside was varnished and polished, just like the outside. No one ever knew.

Gift Survey

Participants should have done a gift survey as "homework" from last week's session. Ask them to look at this.

- * As you look at the results of your gift survey, what clusters of interests and abilities can you identify? Do the results of the survey match your self-perception?
- * *Get a partner and share the results of your survey.* What reaction does your partner have to your survey and your interpretation of it?
- * Where might God be able to use your gifts most effectively right now? in the next 5 years?

Discerning a Call in the Present

- * During the gathering time for this session you reflected on how you have made decisions in the past; what decisions do you face now?
- * What have you learned in reflecting on past decisions which might help you now?
- * To what do you most need to pay attention in discerning your next steps?

Personal Mission Statement

Give participants time to begin writing a personal mission statement. There are many books and internet sites with information on writing a personal mission statement. A Google search will yield a number of forms, processes, and templates. The goal in writing such a statement is to decide what is most important and make a plan for honoring those values. A simple way to approach the task is to fill in the blanks in the following statements:

- * The values which are most important to me are_____.
- * The places I have responsibilities are_____.
- * In order to reflect my values in each of these places I will _____.

For this exercise to be most effective it should be completed over a long period with plenty of time for reflection and rewriting. Emphasize that this a first draft and encourage them to return to it periodically to reevaluate their mission

For a shorter exercise, you might ask participants to complete the sentence, “I feel like my mission in life is to _____ by _____.” (Fill in a mission and the specific ways it will be pursued.)

Sharing our Treasures

The group started the Windows of Faith journey by talking about the two treasures: Your treasures, God’s treasures. By now group members know each other very well. Go around the room and ask participants answer two questions:

- * What are the gifts you see others in the group have brought to the group?
- * What is one “next step” you will take on your spiritual journey, perhaps reflecting what you have heard from others in the group?

Making it Better

Get some feedback for the next time!

- * What did you like best about these last eight weeks of Windows of Faith?
- * If you were going to lead it, how would you make it different?

Note that those who wish to be baptized or received into membership will be introduced to the community at an appropriate service with biographical information gleaned over the past 8 weeks. Be sure everyone is clear concerning the specifics of this service, if this is part of your program.

Gift

If you were able to gather letters of affirmation and support, hand each participant a bundle of “love letters” from people each has expressed appreciation for over the past weeks. Letters might come from sponsors, employers, teachers, and members of your faith community. In communities which designate sponsors, this project can be one of their major contributions to the catechetical process.

Teaser

Remind participants that Windows of Faith is not intended to be a comprehensive theological program. It is an orientation. If they are interested, there is much more to explore. Share information on upcoming opportunities to continue learning and sharing within the community.

Ask if any participants would like to be on the team that leads the next Windows of Faith. Give some examples of ways they can be involved: Would they like to help create a Power Point presentation for one of the sessions? Would they like to talk about their faith with people who are exploring Baptism? Would they like to learn how to ask good questions? Would they like to serve as a sponsor?

If you know, tell when the planning team for the next Windows of Faith will meet for the first time, and invite participation.

Closing

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

Let us pray

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

