

# VocationCARE: Congregations and Young People Exploring Call Together

Many of the approaches and principles of VocationCARE can be useful in the Discipleship Circles model. Mentors for the candidacy process through our Board of Ordained Ministry and other groups in the Virginia Conference have been trained in these approaches. What follows are excerpts from the ***Vocation CARE Leaders' Guide: Congregations and Young People Exploring Call Together*** (© 2010 by The Fund for Theological Education (FTE) All rights reserved. Used with permission.)

**The Fund for Theological Education (FTE)** developed the VocationCARE approach, a cluster of resources which consists of four core communal practices engaged over time in which all Christians grow together into a life “worthy of the calling to which we have been called together with one another” (Ephesians 4:2). Learning to use and teach these practices is the approach called **VocationCARE**. The acronym CARE stands for:

- C** – Create space to explore Christian vocation together;
- A** – Ask self-awakening questions together;
- R** – Reflect theologically on self and community; and
- E** – Enact ministry opportunities.

## THEORY

- If the practices of VocationCARE create deep dialogue in faith communities;
- If this dialogue enriches the congregational “soil” of our faith communities;
- If the seeds of vocation planted in this garden are nurtured by this rich dialogical soil of the congregation;

Then Christian leaders will emerge and pastoral leaders, in particular, will blossom and grow. Congregations will be renewed, healthier and stronger for generations to come.

## PRINCIPLES, ASSUMPTIONS & THEORY BEHIND THE VOCATIONCARE APPROACH

The approach is informed a few underlying principles, assumptions and theories, which are as follows:

### PRINCIPLES

1. **All Christians are called by God and have a vocation.** There is an abundance of rich and diverse gifts within the body of Christ waiting to be discovered. Congregations committed to caring for vocation foster a culture of noticing, naming and nurturing all the gifts among Christ's body, including the call to ordained ministry.

2. **The care for vocation is a communal and intergenerational practice.** The consistent witness of Scripture and our own experiences tell us that the discernment of call and care for vocation is done in the company of adults and young people within the community of faith. In every generation, we have a shared responsibility to care for vocation in all members and to call future pastoral leaders within our congregations.
3. **God's call is an inward/outward invitation to anticipate, listen and respond.** We are continuously invited as the church to listen deeply to one another and together for God's call—and to support one another in faithful action to serve the common good and do God's healing work in the world.
4. **Congregations are called to reclaim and teach vocation care practices.** The church has a role to play in noticing, naming and nurturing the vocation of all its members and a responsibility to teach vocation care practices to the next generation.
5. **Change is created one room at a time.** When we convene people in intimate small groups, ask powerful questions and listen deeply to each other, we create the possibility to fulfill the church's mission in the world.
6. **A choice toward the future is distinct from the past.** VocationCARE is a call to action that inspires faith communities to make choices that say "yes" to a hopeful future. When congregations care for vocation, particularly among young people, they plant seeds for a renewed, hopeful future and witness to God's reign.
7. **Storytelling is a process for discerning choices toward VocationCARE.** Within each person there are many stories longing to be shared and heard. We use a story process as the primary means to discern, discover and clarify a sense of vocation or call—what people really love or care about—and what inspires them to act on behalf of other people finding their own vocation or sense of call.
8. **Learning reflects a process of dialogue, action, reflection and engagement among peers.** The VocationCARE approach is designed to promote interaction and conversation in small groups; to teach toward an open mind (ideas), heart (feelings) and will (actions); and to assist participants in retaining what they have learned.

## **BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF ORGANIZING: A PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING SHARED LEADERSHIP**

While organizing is probably best known in social movements and community and political organizing, the Gospel narratives bear witness to an organizing pattern in the creation of the church. Jesus was an organizer interested in developing a shared leadership team of disciples and followers. In the Gospels, we find the following organizing themes:

- **Called to Ministry:** Jesus was called to ministry out of his baptismal story (Matthew 3:3-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34).
- **A Season of Preparation:** He was led to a time of clarity and preparation through his wilderness story (Matthew 4:1-16; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13).

- **Developing a Team of Disciples:** Prior to fully ramping up his new ministry, Jesus first built relationships and established a diverse, intergenerational team of disciples in the call stories of the disciples (Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 16:20; Luke 5:1-11; Luke 10; John 1:35-51).
- **Organizing the Discipleship Team:** In the story about the seventy being commissioned, he organized the disciples in pairs (Luke 10:1).
- **Mobilizing the Discipleship Team:** Afterward, Jesus mobilized the disciples to go into the villages and towns in the stories about the mission of the twelve and the seventy (Matthew 10:1,5-6; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 9:1-6; Luke 10:1-9).
- **A Season of Gospel Practices:** In the mission stories, Jesus instructs the team of disciples to practice the gospel of peace, healing and proclamation to identify a larger following of the Gospel, which became the catalyst for an emerging Christian movement and the establishment of the church (Matthew 10:7-8; Mark 3:14; Luke 9:2; Luke 10:5-9).

The Gospels provide a pattern for how to organize people around a new ministry. Similar to Jesus, organizing is not a new concept in your church. Your congregation was organized out of a particular history, mission and values. The leadership in your congregation is accustomed to the division of labor between teams—worship, usher, choir, Sunday school, youth ministry, administrative team, etc.

While a ministry team may consist of only two people or is not a term used at all in your congregation, the fundamental point is that it takes a team of people working together to carry out the church's ministry and mission in the world.

## CREATE A SAFE SPACE

The kind of space we imagine for exploring vocation is trustworthy space – both inward space and relational space. It is like the space Jesus made for himself to pray. It is also like the experience of making room in our homes for something new – a new baby, a relative coming to stay, a new piece of furniture. At such times, we have to create a new kind of space within what already exists: taking out some of what is already there, rearranging some of what remains, bringing in new things, and leaving some empty places for what we will need as the reality develops. Creating space within our congregation may mean a physical space in the church where young people find themselves welcomed and relaxed enough to share freely. It may also mean a particular set of adults who are committed to making young people

We cannot change the world by a new plan, project, or idea. We cannot even change other people by our convictions, stories, advice, and proposals; but we can offer a space where people are encouraged to disarm themselves, lay aside their occupations and preoccupations and listen with attention and care to the voices speaking at their own center.

*Henri Nouwen, Reaching Out: The Three Movements of The Spiritual Life*

feel at home. It is not an additional ministry program; rather, it is an ethos a congregation offers that allows people to listen generously across generations and walks of life.

**Scripture:** The story of Mary and Martha tells about the creation of a kind of space that is set apart. Read the story (Luke 10:38-42; John 12:1-3) and reflect together on the kind of spaces you experience in your faith life (i.e. in church, in small groups of which you are a part, in friendships, etc.) Where have you experienced the kind of space Mary knows how to create? How might you envision it?

Three major Acts contribute to **Creating Hospitable Space to Explore Vocation**. For each one, you will find a description of **What It Is** and **How to Lead**.

- Act 1: Covenants of Presence
- Act 2: Holy Listening
- Act 3: Testimony

## **SETTING THE STAGE**

### **Introduction:**

This is precisely the point where we begin to create a new future. The process begins with the very first move: the fact that we are setting an intention, taking the time, and setting apart this space for something new to happen.

### **Step 1: Creating the Physical Space**

As we create the physical space, we are modeling the importance of shared leadership. At the minimum, we find it is helpful to: 1) draw the chairs into a circle without the obstruction of tables; 2) create a focal point for the circle, such as a table with candles, a cross, colorful cloths, plants, etc; 3) invite leaders to show up a few minutes ahead of time to join in a prayer of blessing for the space before you begin. In addition to these ideas, we suggest that you may want to follow these directions to collectively re-create the space each time you gather.

- A. In advance of participants' arrival, the leadership team provides the skeletal structure for the room (tables, chairs, table coverings, as well as a hospitality service of coffee and tea).
- B. Additional objects that might recall the presence of God -- such as plants, rocks, seashells, votive candles, and sacred images with particular meaning for your context-- are placed nearby.
- C. As people gather in the room, they are invited (in silence, with music, or in informal greetings) to *create the space* with one another.

Tip: Some groups find that this preparation time becomes an act of liturgy, a prelude that anticipates the deep and prayerful engagement of each other from one meeting to the next. (Thanks to Hannah Fenley of Saint Andrew Christian Church in Olathe, KS for the idea of engaging participants in creating the space each week.)

## **Step 2: Creating the Inward Space**

We begin to create the inward space by reading a brief poem, meditation, or portion of Scripture that welcomes ourselves and others into a zone of safety, a place that is trustworthy.

### **Tip: Slow down. Breathe deeply. Speak from your center.**

This phrase, sprinkled liberally in the pages that follow, will invite you repeatedly to remember that when we enter this space we set aside the need to hurry, to fill the silence, or to justify ourselves. As Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.” Reading with a calm, steady voice and emphasizing words that strike you as meaningful will help create the inward space.

## **Step 3: Creating the Relational Space**

Central to VocationCARE is a growing awareness that despite the appearance of our separateness, we are all related to one another. One of the first steps toward reclaiming this awareness is to shift the focus of our attention away from self and to our neighbor instead. When we do this we often experience a renewed sense of wonder over the amazing web of our relationships, our nearness even to strangers, and our natural interrelatedness. These realities underlie the joy and satisfaction we feel as human beings when we embrace distributed leadership and co-create ministry in teams. As St. Paul described the body of Christ (I Cor 12:12-26) and as is echoed in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Letters from a Birmingham Jail*, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” The purpose of this step is to focus our attention on our neighbors in the room, and establish an initial sense of connection between us.

## **Covenants of Presence**

**Introduction:** The Covenants of Presence are a list of agreements we make about how we will “show up” when we are together. They are inward and relational disciplines to welcome and honor each person present. When we rehearse them time after time, they prepare us for the role of being trustworthy companions who wonder together about who we are created by God to be and what we are called to do. We review the covenants together each time we meet – as a discipline for creating a certain kind of hospitable space.

## Covenants of Presence: How to Lead

**Step 1:** Read the Covenants aloud (you may choose to do this yourself or have people take turns reading them until all have been shared into the room)

**Step 2:** Ask people to share with a partner which one of the covenants:

- a. seems familiar, comfortable, or particularly welcoming
- b. strikes them as difficult today

**Step 3:** Create a sign of affirmation that symbolizes the groups' agreement to follow these covenants. This might be a spoken affirmation -- such as an *Amen* - - or a ritual one -- such as taking this moment to light a candle on a table set in the same place each time you gather.

## VocationCARE Covenants

1. ***Be fully present, extend and presume welcome.*** Set aside the usual distractions of things undone from yesterday, things to do tomorrow. Welcome others into this space and presume you are welcomed as well.
2. ***Listen generously.*** Listen intently to what is said; listen to the feelings beneath the words. As Quaker Douglas Steere writes, "To *listen* another's soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest gift we can offer to another."
3. ***Author your story.*** We all have a story. Some might say, "I don't have a story" or "a story worth telling," but you do. You must claim authorship and learn to tell it to others.
4. ***We come as equals.*** We don't have the same gifts and graces, but no person's gifts and graces are more or less important than another's.
5. ***It is never "share or die."*** You will be invited to share stories in pairs and in a large group. The invitation is exactly that. *You* will determine the extent to which you want to participate.
6. ***No fixing.*** We are *not* here to set someone else straight, right a wrong, or provide therapy. We are here to witness God's presence and movement in the sacred stories we share.
7. ***Suspend judgment.*** Set aside your judgments. By creating a space between judgments and reactions, we can listen to another person, and to ourselves, more fully.

8. **Turn to wonder.** If you find yourself becoming judgmental, cynical or certain about what you know, try turning to wonder: “I wonder why she shared that story or made those choices?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me?” “I wonder how my story connects to their stories?”
9. **Hold these stories with care.** There are many people who will benefit from the stories they hear during our time together. Imagine hearing another as you would listen to scripture—attentively, mindfully and open to the holy.
10. **Be mindful and respectful of time.** We all have something important to share and the spiritual discipline of time invites us to focus and make particular choices about what to share and how much to share. It also helps us to create the space.
11. **Practice confidentiality care.** We create a safe space by respecting the nature and content of the stories heard. If anyone asks that a story shared be kept in confidence, the group will honor that request.
12. **Believe that it is possible for us to emerge from our time together refreshed, surprised and less burdened than when we came.** Believe that this time can provide renewal, refreshment and possibilities; that seeds planted here will bloom in time to come.

\* Adapted from Touchstones used in The Center for Courage and Renewal's Circles of Trust Retreats

## Holy Listening

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

Douglas V. Steere, a Quaker writing in the aftermath of WWII England wrote:

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

As Steere describes it, holy listening is very different from the common, every day listening we engage in most of the time. In most of our daily conversations, we listen to

what is being said only enough to inject an opinion at the earliest possible moment. We listen with the “outer ear.” With the rest of the mind, we are preparing our own speech.

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

Steere adds one more important mark of holy listening: “To ‘listen’ another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.” He reminds us that “over the shoulder” of the human listener there is the presence of the “eternal listener.”<sup>1</sup>

## Holy Listening: How To Lead

Note: Dyads or Triads? In our experience, community building occurs more quickly in groups of 3, while storytelling in pairs takes less time.

**Leader:** *We are going to practice Holy Listening.*

- *To do this, everyone must find a partner. Please do so now.*
- *Each partner group now, please decide who will speak first. (Hand out Tips for First Hearing and First Storytelling Cards found in the Toolkit)*
- *In a moment, I will ask you a question and give you both a few minutes to think about your answer. When I say “go” the first speaker will begin talking and the first listener will begin listening.*
- *You will have two minutes to speak and to listen. At the end of two minutes I will stop you.*

**Listeners:** *Make eye contact. Give your full attention. Pretend that you have all the time in the world.*

**Storytellers:** *Speak from your heart. Don’t worry about having a beginning, middle and end. Try to be specific and descriptive.*

- *The experience I would like you to reflect upon is: **Tell a story about a time when someone took you and what you love seriously.***
- *Begin. Set time for 2 minutes. Chime when time is up*

**Debrief the initial experience:**

- *Speakers, what did it feel like to speak, uninterrupted? Listeners, what did it feel like to listen? Did two minutes feel like an eternity (too long) or a luxury (more, please)? Did you receive one small whiff of what it might be like to have someone listen as if they had all the time in the world?*
- *Invite them to **switch roles**. Now we give the other person a turn. Speakers will now be listeners.*

**Debrief the second experience:**

- Lead partners into first “for reflection” question: *How was this experience of listening different/familiar? What did you enjoy/find difficult about each role? Can you imagine yourself listening in this way to a peer, your parent, your teen?*
- After a few minutes of partner conversation, debrief the large group with second “for reflection” question: *How did this sharing/listening feel similar or different to conversations usually held at church and/or other places in your faith life?*
- *We’ll practice this again and again. Holy Listening is the disciplined posture of attentiveness that forms a foundation for VocationCARE.*

## Testimony: What it is

We turn now from a focus on how we listen to another’s story to a focus on how we tell our own story. The practice of Testimony works alongside Holy Listening as we create space for conversation around call, vocation, and finding our purpose.

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

Testimony, in some church settings, means standing up to tell one’s conversion experience or personal salvation story. More broadly interpreted, testimony is simply telling the truth of our lives out loud to one another. As we share stories about our lives, we testify to our truths. As we enter a communal process of looking together for ways God is at work in our lives, our testimony grows richer and new understandings emerge. In this way, testimony becomes a practice we can do together, rather than a performance of internal work we have done alone.

“Testimony refers not only to reporting on God’s already-finished action in the world, but also includes the voicing of memories of an experience, event, or relationship that has been tucked into the seams of everyday living. When invited, these might pour forth and come into focus as significant testimony to God’s activity in the small moments of life. In the presence of an artful listener, we may better be able to discern a pattern of calling, claiming, and ongoing revelation woven through these life events.”

*From: “Lives to Offer” by Dori Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer*

## Testimony: How to Lead

- Remind them of the process: *In a moment, we are going to embark on a second round of Holy Listening, this time paying attention to the role of Testimony. I will ask you a question*

*and give you both a few minutes to think about your answer. When I say “go” the first speaker will begin talking and the first listener will begin listening.*

- *You will have two minutes to speak and to listen. At the end of two minutes I will stop you.*
- *The question I would like you to reflect upon is: **Tell a story about why you do what you do, love what you love, or care about what you care about.***
- *Begin. Set time for 2 minutes. Chime when time is up*
- *Invite them to **switch roles**. Now we give the other person a turn. Speakers will now be listeners.*

### **Leader:**

- Lead partners into first “for reflection” question: What **feelings** emerged as you shared your stories? Where did you identify with one another’s stories? Take a few moments to go deeper into the story or to share points of identification that arise in your conversation.
- After a few minutes of partner conversation, debrief the large group with second “for reflection” question: How did this experience feel? What if anything might this experience suggest for you?

## **OVERVIEW OF A: ASK SELF-AWAKENING QUESTIONS**

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

“Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart ... Try to love the questions themselves ... Live the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers.”

*Rainer Maria Rilke*

**Scripture:** The prophet Micah asks a series of questions (Micah 6:6-8) that wonder about a faithful response to God’s call. A lawyer in the Gospel of Luke asks Jesus: What must I do to inherit eternal life? (Luke 10:25-37). Moses asks the provocative question “Who am I that I should go?” (Exodus 3:1-12). All of these are scriptural examples of questions that wake people up to the big questions about the purpose and meaning of their lives. Read one of these stories and reflect together on times in your life when someone has asked you a *big* question that *woke you up*.

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

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

The acts to help people understand **Self-Awakening Question** are:

- Framing and Practicing Self-Awakening Questions
- Letting Go

## **Framing and Practicing Self Awakening Questions**

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

## Framing Self-Awakening Questions\*

Here are some helpful guidelines for crafting good questions:

1. The best questions are simple, brief and to the point.
2. They are questions that you could not anticipate the answers to and that invites the storyteller into deeper self-reflection on his or her faith, gifts and sense of call or meaning.
3. Avoid asking questions with right or wrong answers. Instead, ask “how,” “what” or “why” questions because they tend to focus inquiry, stimulate reflection, touch a deeper meaning and generate curiosity in the storyteller when crafted well.
4. Explore questions that invite images or metaphors because they can open things up in ways that more direct questions don't.
5. Ask questions that help the storyteller to reflect on clarifying feelings, vivid images, passions, concerns, hopes and values as well as patterns and themes in his or her story.
6. Ask questions that help the storyteller to explore his or her inner realities—who am I—as well as the outward facts—what does he or she love, care about or value.
7. Ask questions aimed at helping the storyteller to walk around in his or her story—in order to remember the risks or challenges, choices and outcomes—rather than satisfying your own curiosity.
8. Watch the pacing of the questions, allowing some silence between the last answer and the next question. Questions that emerge too quickly and often may feel a little intrusive, cutting off the deep reflection that can help the storyteller.
9. Trust your intuition in asking questions. If you are not sure about a particular question, sit with it for a while and wait for clarity.
10. As you listen deeply to the storyteller allow your questions to emerge from a place where your head and heart are opened to the presence of the holy.

\* Adapted from Caryl Hurtig Casbon's *"Framing Open Questions"* and the Center for Courage and Renewal's *"Guidelines to Asking Open and Honest Questions."*

## Framing and Practicing Self-Awakening Questions: How to Lead

- Ask your group to form into smaller groups of three. Choose a storyteller.
- Remind them of the process and point to how this round will be slightly different: *In a moment we are going to embark on another round of Holy Listening, this time opening ourselves particularly to the choices the storyteller made, the challenges he/she overcame, and the outcome of the story. I will give the storyteller a moment to craft their story. When I say “go” the storyteller will begin talking and the listeners will begin listening.*
- *You will have two minutes to speak and to listen. At the end of two minutes I will stop you.*
- *The experience I would like you to reflect upon is: **Tell a story about a time when what you loved and care about was at risk and you had a choice to make.***

Note: If you have completed the “Language of Vocation: What It Is and How to Lead It” exercise from the tool-kit, you will re-tell the same story here. As you retell the story, try to tell it in more specificity, with more detail, and with more attention to the choices, challenges and outcomes.

- Begin. Set time for 2 minutes. Chime when time is up

**Leader:** Lead groups into the practice of asking self-awakening questions:

- Listeners: Huddle together for a few minutes and come up with 2-3 questions that you believe to be “self-awakening,” based on the learning we just did together.
- Listeners: Pose your questions to the storyteller
- Storyteller: Do not try to answer the question; try to evaluate its self-awakening qualities. Give feedback as to whether or not the question: 1. Opens new horizons of possible meaning; 2. Awakens you to a deeper level of reflection; 3: Leads to a possible “aha” insight.
- Storyteller and Listeners: Discuss together what seemed to make for good self-awakening questions.

**Closing Reflection:** Ask people to call to mind the people in their life who have been the ones to ask questions that jog them out of complacency into new awareness, stories they’ve told and the stories they’ve heard. There may be overlap, as some of the stories might have been retold and grown deeper with each round of questions and listening.

- *What are the range of emotions you might feel when asked a self-awakening question? Is it always pleasant and welcome, or can you imagine or remember a time when it has been disorienting or even resisted?*
- *What next most faithful step (what action) might these stories and reflections be calling forth in you? Did you have any “aha” moments? What are you called to do because of these stories and the time we have spent sitting with them?*

## Letting Go

**Introduction:** Holy listening and testimony put us back in touch with our deep values, realigning or “tuning” our minds, hearts and wills to what really matters most. Self-awakening questions help sharpen our attentiveness to where and how the Holy Spirit is moving in our individual and collective lives. But human nature being what it is, there is yet another discipline we need to practice—Letting Go. Letting go of old habits of the heart, mind and will is necessary before we are really ready to let new ideas and inspirations fill us and move us into the future. This practice helps us empty our “old wine skins” and make room for the “new wine” or the creativity and joy of Pentecost (Luke 5:33-39, Matt. 9:14-17 and Mark 2:18-22). Letting Go is an opportunity to suspend our patterned ways of knowing that may be ossified, stuck, or just a crutch that we no longer need.

Read this quote from Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* for a good description of Letting Go:

*In ancient Jerusalem, there was a gate called “the needle” which was so narrow that when a fully loaded camel approached it, the camel driver had to take off all the bundles before the camel could pass through. Referring obliquely to this well-known image of his day, Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” At the bottom of the U lies a sort of inner gate, which likewise requires us to drop the baggage we’ve acquired on our journey...When this “threshold” is crossed collectively people offer many different accounts of the experience. Some talk about extraordinary creativity, some about almost boundless energy, yet others about a dialogue where people forget who is saying what...Getting to that “different place” that allows presencing to occur begins as we develop a capacity to let go and surrender our perceived need for control.*

## Letting Go: How To Lead

**Leader:** We are going to practice letting go.

- Before we do this, take a moment to center yourself. Take a few deep breaths, in and out. Get ready to be present to this moment. Everyone needs to be seated in a chair.
- Find a place on your seat that you can grip with your hands. Imagine that there is zero gravity in this room and the only way you can stay in your chair is to hold onto it for dear life. Imagine that if you let go you would float away.
- Don’t stop holding the chair. Close your eyes and begin to imagine a negative belief you have about yourself or something you are ashamed of. Now, holding your chair even more tightly, imagining that you are holding on to this negative belief. Hold it tightly for eight seconds – as if your very life depended on it.
- Now, as you release your grip on the chair also release this belief. Experience the belief floating away, up away from your body, over your head, through the ceiling and into the sky. Let it go. Un-tether it. Feel yourself being untied from it.
- Now imagine a positive belief about yourself or something you are really proud of.
- Grip it tightly as if your identity depended on it .Hold onto it tightly for 8 seconds.

- Now release it. Unhand it. Just let it Go.
- Next focus on a negative opinion or judgment you have about someone in the room.
- Grip it. Really hold onto it tightly. Tense your muscles as you concentrate on this negative opinion
- Now, release it. Open your hands and let it go.

Focus on positive opinion, something you like or admire about someone in the room. Maybe a quality that you are envious of or wish you had.

- Grip it.
- Release it. Let it go.

Now focus on a negative belief you have about the Church. Something you think is perhaps a major, unsolvable problem.

- Pour your energy into gripping this negative belief, this problem. Really feel yourself focused on its power.
- Let it go. Feel it release.

Now focus on a positive belief you have about the Church. Something you think is wonderful and gives you hope about the future.

- Allow yourself to feel the energy of your hope, your desire, in the way you hold it tightly. Grip it. Hold it for eight seconds
- Now, release it. Let it go.

**Note:** Allow time to sit with the feeling of having let go.

## Reflecting Theologically: A View from the Balcony

Before we move forward to the next act in VocationCARE, let's pause to take in a balcony view of what we just did.

- We introduced Holy Listening, allowing participants to experience a deep, slow kind of listening that may be counter-intuitive to many. **We LISTENED.**
- We introduced Testimony, asking people to share the feelings and associated stories that occur when "deep speaks to deep." **We IMMERSED ourselves in our feelings and associations.**
- We introduced Self-Awakening Questions, helping each other wonder more deeply about our choices and about the ways we can listen more carefully for God's call in our lives. **We VIEWED the wider connections between our story and God's story.**
- Then, in the midst of a new kind of space our conversations had created, we practiced Letting Go of some deeply engrained habitual ways of thinking. We wondered together about the next most faithful step to which these conversations might lead. **We EXPLORED the "aha-moments" and wondered what actions might be called forth in us.**

Four moves imbedded in our journey thus far (Listen, Immerse, View it Wider and Explore aha-moments and actions make up the four moves of a method of theological reflection we'll be introducing soon.

We call this process L.I.V.E. and discuss it more thoroughly under the section Reflecting Theologically on Self and Others. For now, it is good to notice that VocationCARE involves a rhythm in which the stories of our lives are held – not as solo acts – but as parts of a communal journey in relation to God's story.

God is in the kitchen with us, among the pots and pans.

*St. Teresa of Avila*

## OVERVIEW OF R: REFLECT THEOLOGICALLY ON SELF AND OTHERS

Reflecting theologically on self and community is a disciplined practice of putting our lives and experiences in conversation with our religious heritage. It happens when we look for the places where our stories intersect with God's story. We do this by paying attention to the feelings that arise in a story or life event and asking questions such as: Where did I experience the holy? Or What image of God from Scripture or tradition seems to hold meaning right now? When practiced in a community, theological reflection can help provoke new insights about who God is and how God acts through us and in our world. Theological reflection can also lead us to wonder about how we are called to act next. What small step might we take as we seek to be co-creators enacting God's *shalom* in our world? In this way, theological reflection enables us to find meaning and purpose in our daily lives, in addition to imagining the trajectories of our lifetimes.

### Scripture:

The story of the road to Emmaus is a moment of theological reflection. The two disciples see the inbreaking of God's story in their very human path (Luke 24:13-35). Another Scripture that points to the intersection between God's story and a human story is the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:5-30)

I believe in parables. I navigate my life using stories where I find them, and I hold tight to the ones that tell me new kinds of truth.

*Barbara Kingsolver*

The act to help people understand **Reflecting Theologically** is:

- L.I.V.E.

## **L.I.V.E.**

**Introduction:** L.I.V.E. is a method of group theological reflection. Theological reflection is the process of finding the intersection between our stories and God's story. Through theological reflection, people discern the actions to which God may be calling them. Usually practiced in community, theological reflection is a hallmark of groups around the globe who have set out to change the world to make it a more faithful representation of God's shalom.

The steps of **L.I.V.E.** are:

1. **Listen** carefully to a story. Breathe deeply and allow yourself to be fully present to the story. Allow it to wash over you, as if you expect God to be present somewhere in it. Listen to the nuances, images, colors, smells, and sights in the story. Allow memories, feelings, and associations to come to mind as you experience the storyteller's world.
2. **Immerse** yourself in the feelings and associations that the story calls forth in you. Do you feel peaceful, afraid, excited, happy, nervous, anxious, joyful, blissful, frustrated, or sad? A good way to uncover feelings is to pay attention to your body. Did your muscles tense? Did your eyes tear up? Did your breathing get shallow or speed up? Who do you identify with in the story? What stories from your own life does it recall?
3. **View it Wider.** Open your vision to see where this small story connects with larger stories. How does this story remind you of what you know about God? Does it remind you of a story from the Bible, a snippet of a sermon, or a line from a hymn? Does it connect with a holy memory from your childhood, say of a family gathering or a time when you felt completely and totally at home in the universe? What name would you give this moment if it were a short story? What does God look like to you as you ponder this moment?
4. **Explore** "aha-moments" and actions to which the story and our reflection on it might be calling you. Is there something about reflecting on this moment that you want to take forward with you into the day? Is there some **action**, small or large, you would like to take today in response to this story or to God's call in your life? The action might be a simple one that underlines an "**Aha-moment**", such as "I will look up to see the stars more often." Or it may be more costly, such as "I will commit to repairing a relationship that's broken," or "I will pay closer attention to the plight of my neighbor..."

## OVERVIEW OF E: ENACT MINISTRY OPPORTUNITIES

Jesus gathered his friends and sent them out in pairs to DO something. In a similar way, it is important to invite everyone within the congregation to act, to try new ways of following the call of Christ, even as they grow in knowledge they cannot fully articulate. Experts tell us we learn by doing and we value experience over abstract information. To care for vocation, our congregations have to create meaningful ways for members to try out their vocational impulses, especially in the areas of ministry and church leadership—and then reflect on the experience alone and together.

In a very real sense all the "acts" we have done to this point are preparation for the practice of enacting Ministry Opportunities. The practice of "E" begins with envisioning the future-- this is our "Pentecost." Here, we give free reign to the ways the Holy Spirit might be speaking through us and unleash our unfettered creativity in a burst of chaotic ideas. In this stage we are focused on being attentive to what new passions, possible actions, and ideas are coming into our minds, hearts, and wills and giving these ideas full expression.

God's story is revealed in our story in myriad and mysterious ways.  
Each of us is the pen with which God is wiring a fifth Gospel.

Judith Siqueria

**Scripture:** The stories in the Acts of the Apostles with regard to Stephen and the first Servant Leaders (Acts 6); the conversions of Saint Paul and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8); and Saint Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10) are examples of the disciples exploring, enacting and establishing opportunities for ministry.

The acts to help people understand **Enacting Ministry Opportunities** are:

- A Walk Into the Future: Letting Come
- Brainstorming
- Design Studio

### A Walk into the Future

#### Introduction:

Throughout the Christian story we find ordinary people who have done extraordinary things because of their encounter with the Holy. This guided, embodied meditation is intended to slow us down enough for such an encounter, one that we call Letting Come.

In the last section we practiced Letting Go, which created an inward space by letting go of attachments to particular ways of knowing and being that define our past. Letting Go makes space for something new to emerge within us. It is about envisioning a future within us waiting to emerge. Letting come is the process of welcoming new wine into new wine skins. The practice embodies a truth from the Gospel of Luke, “the Kin-dom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21).

We cannot enact what we have not seen within us. When we meditate, we become more aware of the presence of God and more conscious of the deeper longings within us. These longings are closely associated with vocation and call, which connects with some aspect of a compelling future of *shalom* waiting to be born. In this way, our deepest longings of vocation and God’s dream for the world are intimately connected and deeply intertwined.

We have a responsibility to pay attention to what God seeks to do through us to bring about the future and the role we can play. This future is planted in the stories we have heard and shared, and represents opportunities for ministry—invitations to play a role in God’s healing work in the world. Thus, the first step to enacting the future requires that we practice cultivating a capacity to see within us a compelling future worth enacting.

It’s common to say that trees come from seeds. But how could a tiny seed create a huge tree? Seeds do not contain the resources needed to grow a tree. These must come from the medium or environment within which the tree grows. But the seed does provide something that is crucial: a place where the whole of the tree starts to form. As resources such as water and nutrients are drawn in, the seed organizes the process that generates growth. In a sense, the seed is a gateway through which the future possibility of the living tree emerges.

*Peter Senge*

## **A Walk into the Future: How to Lead**

PROMPT: Identify a partner or two other people that you will meet with after this exercise. Find a comfortable place and position. Close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths. Release. Free your mind of your worry, concern, questions, excitement or enthusiasm. Open your mind, heart and will. Now journey down from your head into your heart and try to become in tune with your feelings and surroundings.

Imagine standing at a doorway of a possible future where your church is caring for vocation and enacting opportunities for people to explore their sense of

purpose. It is future where young people are responding to a call to ministry and leading the church in your context?

First 10 minutes:

- Take one step forward. What do you see past that doorway into the future?
- Step through the threshold of the doorway into the future.
- Turn around 360 degrees. What do you see? What's different? Who is there? What are people doing? How are people inter-generationally relating to each other? What is the mood of the community? How are you feeling? What are the sounds? How are you and others caring for vocation in young people and adults who work with them?

Next 10 minutes:

- From that future place look back through the doorway to the past and find yourself. What advice do you give to past self to move toward the future you see?
- Walk back through the doorway and return again to the present. Write what you saw, felt and heard. Be as specific as you can about the images, feelings and activities that took place in your vision.

Next 10 minutes:

- Find your partner or triad
- Take turns describing the vision and intentions of your vision to your partners. Describe as concretely as possible what you saw and all the elements that occurred.
- Allow each speaker three minutes
- Capture themes

## A View from the Balcony

Before we move forward to brainstorming and designing opportunities enact what have experienced, felt and seen, let's pause to take in a balcony view of what we just did. Let's look at what we experienced through a particular frame diagrammed below as a means for describing the discernment and enactment process we just finished.

Notice that we **created a space** to explore vocation together; we learned how to frame and practice **asking self-awakening questions** of each other; we **reflected theologically** together using the L.I.V.E. method and we have just finished the first phase of **enacting ministry opportunities** through envisioning exercise.

Now that we have created a space and rhythm of slowing down to encounter God and the Presence of Jesus in our midst long enough for our hearts and souls to capture a vision placed in our spirit, we can now begin to give shape to and enact our visions of God's future for the church and for emerging leaders who will lead it into its future.

**Tip: Draw. Doodle. Sing.** This is an exercise that helps people capture a large amount of new information and experience for future reference. If this group is experiencing Acts 1-7 in quick secession, as in a weekend retreat format, it is helpful to

pause from the experience to do this, either after A Walk Into the Future or a little later, after Brainstorming (explained in the next session.)

a. Gather plenty of paper, pens, markers, clay and other media that might inspire people to create.

b. Ask people to consider a metaphor that is organic to their life, culture or context that might help them express what they have experienced so far—from Creating the Space, Holy Listening and Testimony all the way through to A Walk into the Future (or Brainstorming).

c. Allow yourself to sit with the most powerful images, feelings, stories of questions that are reverberating in you.

d. If you like to draw, draw. If you like to doodle, doodle. If you are a poet, write. If you are a musician, compose. Find some way of creatively expressing this experience so that, if you look back upon this composition later, you will almost immediately be able to remember how you are feeling right now.

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