



Called to Life Participant Guide

A Program of the Collegeville Institute Seminars

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Called to Life

Welcome to *Called to Life*, an opportunity created by the Collegeville Institute Seminars to help you explore your understanding of God's call in your life. Our program has two tracks: *Called to Work* focuses on professional work, while *Called to Life* explores vocation in relation to our whole lives.

As you explore different aspects of vocation in each session, you will find that certain questions speak more to your experience than others, since God calls us in different ways. But in the midst of life's busyness, we don't always take time to reflect on the deeper meaning of our lives in light of our faith. We hope that by exploring questions of vocation, you will learn more about your own sense of calling:

- What is my sense of God's callings in my life?
- How can I learn to listen to God's call?
- How do I live out multiple callings in service to others?
- How have challenges and struggles shaped my callings?
- How is my vocation changing over my lifetime?

Over the next few weeks your small group will gather for conversations around vocation. We created this Participant Guide to deepen your group discussion with personal reflection before and after each meeting. In our work with congregations, we find that people report a more meaningful experience if they invest time reflecting on the readings and questions before and after the meeting.

Vocation is the story of our lives. We hope that *Called to Life* will help you to enter more deeply into your own story. As your eyes and ears are opened to God's presence, may you listen to your life and the lives of others speak truth about God's hopes and dreams for you.

"A Christian vocation is a gradual revelation—of me to myself by God...

It is who we are, trying to happen."

*Evelyn and James Whitehead,
Seasons of Strength: New Visions of Adult Christian Maturing*

What is a calling?

As you begin *Called to Life*, you may be wondering about the idea of calling. Maybe you were taught that only ordained ministers had a calling from God. Maybe you grew up thinking that vocation related to vo-tech school. Or maybe you have no idea what the words “vocation” or “calling” mean.

It’s okay to be confused about the concept. The idea of being called by God is not always clear. While a few people describe experiencing a distinct and direct call from God, most of us never hear a voice from heaven telling us exactly what to do or where to go. But we do experience God at work in our lives, even if it’s often indirectly. We may “hear” God through a song, a prayer at church, a conversation with a friend, or a moment of silence in nature.

In *Called to Life*, we use “calling” and “vocation” (from the Latin *vocare*, meaning “to call”) interchangeably to describe how God works in our lives. We draw from Christianity’s long history of calling as a metaphor for relationship with God, particularly as it is experienced in the service of others, an image found throughout scripture—from God calling Adam and Eve in the garden to Jesus calling his disciples in their fishing boats.

But there are other images that may fit how you experience God. God might guide or lead you, nudge or push or pull you in a certain direction. Sometimes we feel God’s presence deep within us, like a sense of peace after we make a difficult decision. Other times we experience God in the world outside: looking up at a sky full of stars as we wonder about our life, gazing out onto ocean waves as we imagine our future. God’s call is not always something we hear—it might be something we see, touch, dream, or notice in the people and the world around us.

No matter what you may have previously thought about vocation, we invite you to explore the idea of calling in new ways through *Called to Life*.

To read familiar Scripture stories with fresh eyes.

To listen to parts of your life you may have never heard before.

To see service to others as the heart of what it means to be Christian.

To learn from other people’s journeys and questions.

To open the ear of your heart to God.

Introductory Session

Welcome to your first small group meeting. In this session you will get to know the other participants and explore the four practices that make up *Called to Life*:

- **Praying:** through the practice of *lectio divina*
- **Sharing:** in your small group's conversation
- **Reflecting:** on the questions in the Participant Guide
- **Listening:** to yourself, to others, and to God

Praying

Your group will begin your meeting in prayer in order to ground your time together in sacred listening to God. **We invite you to learn more about the prayer practice of *lectio divina* by reading the introduction below.**

Prayerful discernment is the central Christian practice for discovering and deepening an awareness of vocation. Discernment means sifting through all the voices and choices facing us in order to hear and follow the voice of God. To introduce you to one practice of discernment, we invite you to pray with *lectio divina* before and after each small group meeting of *Called to Life*.

Lectio divina, or “holy reading,” is a slow, quiet and thoughtful encounter with Scripture. This prayer practice has been used by Christians since Saint Benedict described *lectio divina* in his “Rule of Saint Benedict” around the year 500. *Lectio divina* aims to help us discern what God is calling us to be and to do, as we listen for God’s voice through the stories of Scripture.

But *lectio divina* is different from Bible study. We let the Scripture passage stand alone, without additional explanation or commentary, because *lectio divina* is an encounter between God’s Word and our lives. Slowly reading and reflecting on the biblical passage three times provides time and space for God’s Word to move from our lips, into our minds, and finally into our hearts.

We invite you to try this prayer practice as a way of deepening your dialogue with God as you go through *Called to Life*. Over time, *lectio divina* can become a prayer that opens your heart to hear how God is speaking in your everyday life. As you become comfortable with this form of prayer, you might try taking the word or phrase that spoke to you from the week’s Scripture and holding it in mind as you go about your day, praying with the word or phrase at the start and end of each day.

Lectio divina

- ❖ *Find a quiet place for your reflection. Begin in prayer:*

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

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

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

...

For your opening meeting, we invite your group to practice *lectio divina* with the Scripture below, led by your facilitator through the steps outlined above.

Moses said to the people: "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

Deuteronomy 30:11-15, 19-20

Sharing

Called to Life is centered around stories: your own experiences, other people's stories, and God's story as revealed in Scripture. In the small group meetings, you will have the opportunity to share your stories and listen to others share their perspectives. We invite your group to begin by sharing short **introductions** as led by your facilitator.

You may wish to share a few words about what drew you to join this group. Have you been wondering about the deeper purpose of your life? Do you feel frustrated that your faith feels disconnected from your work or relationships? Are you facing a time of transition and want to know what God wants for you? Feel free to write down a few thoughts on **what you hope to gain from *Called to Life***:

Your group will review together the Guidelines for Discussion and the Covenant of Commitment to start building a sense of community with each other. **What strikes you about the guidelines and covenant? What questions or concerns do you have about them?**

Reflecting

Personal reflection is a key component of *Called to Life*. The Participant Guide will lead you through the reflections that will deepen your engagement with these questions of calling and strengthen your habits of prayer with God.

Your facilitator will walk you through this Participant Guide and the steps of preparing for each session: praying with *lectio divina*, reflecting on the reading, and answering the questions.

Remember: the more time you spend in preparation for the group meeting, the more meaningful your experience will be and the more lasting impact it can have upon your life.

Listening

We hope that *Called to Life* will provide you with opportunities to **listen deeply**:

- To *yourself*, spending time in quiet reflection before each meeting
- To *others*, offering the gift of attention and a safe space in which to share stories
- To *God*, deepening the dialogue of prayer and discernment at the heart of vocation

When we listen to each other, we often ask “**conventional questions**” (questions that can be answered with yes and no, or questions that try to advise someone or simply satisfy our own curiosity). For example:

- Have you talked to your boss/spouse about this situation?
- Why don’t you start looking for another job?
- Why are you considering divorce?

Called to Life provides an opportunity to practice what author Diane Millis calls “**contemplative questions**”—open-ended questions that begin with close listening, allow for silence to let the story sink in, and then invite an exploration of what has been shared. While conventional questions tend to keep our conversations on the surface, contemplative questions deepen our discovery of how God is at work in our lives. For example:

- What experiences have you had in the past that might shed light on this situation?
- How do you imagine God might respond to your concern?
- What are you finding to be life-giving at this time?

To practice these listening skills, your group will watch a video from our *Lives Explored* video project in which people share stories of their experience of God at work in their lives: <http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-seminars/resources-for-congregations/lives-explored/>

As you watch the video, first *listen to yourself* by paying attention to your own reaction. **What parts of the story connect with your experience? What parts challenge you?**

Next, *listen to others* in your group as you share your responses to the video. Imagine what questions you might ask the storyteller if he/she was present with you today. To begin to recognize the difference between asking conventional questions and contemplative questions, **think of a conventional question you would ask the storyteller. Then offer a contemplative question that would invite the storyteller to go deeper in his/her own story.**

Finally, *listen to God* as your group closes its first meeting in prayer. **What do you hear God saying to your heart as you begin *Called to Life*?**

Session 1: How God Calls

The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord,
for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Now there was a great wind,
so strong that it was splitting mountains
and breaking rocks before the Lord,
but the Lord was not in the wind;
and after the wind an earthquake—
but the Lord was not in the earthquake;
and after the earthquake a fire—
but the Lord was not in the fire;
and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle
and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Then there came a voice to him
that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

1 Kings 19:11-13

Praying

Using the outline of lectio divina, reflect on the Scripture passage above. Then take a few minutes to reflect on the question and write your thoughts below.

Elijah expects to experience God in the power of nature. But instead God was revealed to him in a “sound of sheer silence.” Reflect on a time in your life when God showed up in a way entirely different from what you expected. How did this experience feel? What did you learn about God?

Reflecting

When people are asked to reflect on vocation, they often protest: “I don’t think I’ve ever been called by God.” The word “vocation” comes from the Latin word *vocare*, meaning “to call,” and Scripture often describes God’s call as a voice that is heard. (Think about God speaking to Moses in the burning bush or waking up Samuel in the middle of the night.) We may assume that if we’ve never heard a booming voice from heaven telling us where to go or what to do, then we haven’t been called by God.

But Elijah’s story offers us an intriguing alternative. After dramatic displays of God’s power in nature, the prophet finally hears God in “a sound of sheer silence.” (Other translations of this verse say that Elijah heard “a tiny whispering sound” or “a light silent sound.”) Elijah is so overwhelmed by the presence of God he experiences that he has to cover his face. Those of us who have never heard God’s call as an audible voice can take comfort and inspiration from this story: God can “speak” through no sound at all.

Many people can echo Elijah’s experience of feeling God’s presence through the quiet and calm of silence. But there are probably other ways that you have felt God communicating with you: through prayer, other people, music, dreams or a sudden insight. We experience God in nature and in church, in our own thoughts and in the words of others. All of these can be ways that God calls.

Perhaps you have felt drawn towards a certain decision, relationship or job. Maybe you have felt God through a sense of inner peace or affirmation, or as comfort when discouraged. Maybe you have experienced God in a powerful healing or in the reconciliation of a broken relationship. There are many different ways to describe God at work in our lives: leading, pulling, pushing, nudging, hinting, helping, or guiding us.

1) Check the boxes for any of the following ways that you have felt God communicating in your life.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conversation with others | <input type="checkbox"/> The needs of the world |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer | <input type="checkbox"/> Scripture |
| <input type="checkbox"/> An experience of nature | <input type="checkbox"/> Intuition or insight |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Everyday events | <input type="checkbox"/> Music |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Something you read | <input type="checkbox"/> Worship or liturgy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Work or other activity | <input type="checkbox"/> Dreams |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The example or influence of other people | <input type="checkbox"/> Silence |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

Once we become aware of how God works in our lives, we can start to consider deeper questions of vocation. This is known as the process of **discernment**: the practice of personal prayer and reflection with others that examines our lives to see how God is calling us. Discernment involves paying attention to our experiences in order to recognize God's presence. We can sharpen our vision and increase our understanding of the ways God is present with us through our practice of reading and reflecting on Scripture, whether alone or in community.

You may already have habits of discernment, even if you have never considered them as such. Perhaps you have a trusted friend that you talk to about big decisions. Maybe you journal or pray or take a walk when you are wrestling with an important question. Or maybe, like Elijah, you need to seek silence and stillness to find God.

Discernment practices help us develop ways of deepening our relationship with God that can guide us during times of change, confusion or questioning. Through discernment we learn to listen to ourselves, to others, and to the world around us.

2) Return to the list on the previous page and pick one of the boxes that you checked. Describe a time that you felt God at work in this way. **What did you learn from this experience of God's presence?**

Where do we notice God at work— in our relationships, in our work, or in our everyday activities? How do we understand what God wants for and from our lives? What other voices around us are competing with God's voice or leading us away from the good God wants for us? How might our own resistance —when we choose to ignore God's invitation or seek our own desires rather than seeking God's way—become a barrier to living out our calling? These are all questions of vocation that call for careful discernment.

As you begin *Called to Life*, spend some time considering what questions are weighing heaviest on your heart these days. Part of discernment involves sifting through the many choices we face every day to discover the deeper questions that drive us.

In what part of your life do you long for clarity and direction?

Where do you hope God will show you how to proceed?

What injustice in the world cries out for your attention?

What hopes and fears do you have about changes you are facing?

Each stage of life's journey raises different questions about what to do, where to go, who to be—and all of these are questions of vocation. What questions do you bring with you today?

2) If you could ask God one question about your vocation as you begin *Called to Life*, what would it be?

Sharing

When you meet with your small group, the following questions will be discussed:

- 1) Share a story of a time that you felt God at work in your life (for example, through an experience of nature or an encounter with another person). What did you learn from this experience?

- 2) If you could ask God one question about your vocation as you begin *Called to Life*, what would it be?

After the Meeting

Using the outline of lectio divina, return to the Scripture passage at the beginning of the session and take a few minutes to reflect on the questions and write your thoughts below.

Reflecting on your group's discussion, what insight did you receive—from others' stories or from sharing your own experiences—about how God works in your life?

Watch one of the *Lives Explored* videos (we suggest Ken's or Jane's story):

<http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-seminars/resources-for-congregations/lives-explored/>

What part of your own experience do you hear echoed or challenged by this person's understanding of how God calls in their life?

To read more...

For other stories of how God calls:

- In silence: Isaiah 41:1
- In dreams: Matthew 1:18-25
- Within ourselves: Luke 1:39-45
- In darkness: Job 4:12-16
- Through mysterious encounters: Luke 1:26-38
- In moments of blinding clarity: Acts 9:1-19
- In moments of internal revelation or insights: Galatians 1:11-17
- Through conversation with strangers: Genesis 18:1-15
- Through Scripture and through other people: Acts 8:26-40
- Through the activity of work: Jeremiah 18:1-6
- When we go out in search of God: Luke 19:1-10

Session 2: Our Plans & God's Plan

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

Jeremiah 29: 11-14

Praying

Using the outline of lectio divina, reflect on the Scripture passage above. Then take a few minutes to reflect on the questions and write your thoughts below.

Jeremiah uses many different verbs to describe the relationship between God and people: God *knows, gives, plans, hears* and *says*. We *call, come, pray, search, seek* and *find*. What verb or verbs in this passage speaks to you today? What might this word or words reveal about your relationship with God?

Before your group meeting, watch one of the *Lives Explored* videos (we suggest Peg's or Francois' story): <http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-seminars/resources-for-congregations/lives-explored/>

What part of your experience do you hear echoed or challenged by this person's understanding of God's invitation in relation to their own plans?

Reflecting

Think back to a time when you had a clear plan for your life. Perhaps as a child you knew exactly what you wanted to be when you grew up. Or when you finished college, you had neatly plotted out how your professional and personal paths would unfold. Maybe some of these “best laid plans” did work out exactly as you hoped, but more than likely your journey has taken many twists and turns you never expected. Life does not always turn out the way we plan.

1) **Describe a time that one of your “best laid plans” went astray.** (For example, a job or relationship that did not work out, or an opportunity you were denied). How did it impact your relationship with God when your plans were frustrated?

2) Now describe a time when your plans seemed to work out smoothly and you felt an alignment with what God wanted from your life and what you hoped for. **How did this sense of affirmation affect your relationship with God and/or those around you?**

It can be hard to comprehend how all our plans exist within God’s larger plan of love for our lives and for the life of the world. Each day we are faced with so many choices that we can begin to think we are the ones in control. But God’s reassuring words from Jeremiah remind us that all our worrying and wandering, planning and preparing, is already wrapped within God’s loving embrace. Our primary calling as Christians is to partner with Christ in the living out of our vocation.

This passage from Jeremiah is part comforting and part frustrating. We are assured that God has plans for us, and that they are good plans for a future full of hope. But God does not spell out exactly what these plans are. Instead God promises to hear us when we call and to be found when we seek.

When we want clarity or control over the choices or challenges we face, this answer may not seem satisfying. When we question the suffering in our own lives or the injustices throughout the world today, we can become discouraged that God's plans for love seem so far from the reality around us.

But if we dig deeper, we can glimpse a powerful insight in Jeremiah's words. What God promises is relationship: a lifetime of seeking and finding, of call and response. God is not keeping the specifics of vocation secret from us to be cruel, but is instead beckoning us to see our relationship with God as the foundation for all our seeking and searching. As we sort through the choices we face and try to grow in wisdom about how to live a good life, we are called first and foremost to turn to God in prayer. And God will be faithful to us as we seek to serve out of love to help those in need.

When we set this relationship with God as the heart of vocation, our perspective can shift. Rather than feeling anxious that we do not have a clear sense of calling, we can grow into the invitation to see the wider scope of our life as part of our ongoing response to God. Rather than seeking a perfect fit of work or relationships that always seem ideal, we can accept that the Christian call to live out the Gospel will always involve some discomfort as we seek out the stranger, the outcast, and the neighbor in need. Vocation is not an easy answer, but a multi-faceted lens through which we view the questions of our life.

Looking at all our roles, relationships and responsibilities, we can see how a sense of calling and responding is created by the ways we weave together:

- **who we are called to be**—the core of our identity as created by God, baptized in Christ, and sent forth to serve by the power of the Holy Spirit;
- **how we are called to live**—our commitments of lifestyle and relationships, including marriage, parenting, or the single life;
- **what we are called to do**—the work, service and activities that fill our daily lives, including paid or professional work, volunteering, homemaking, raising children or caregiving.

God's invitation to relationship touches each of these three areas:

The simple fact of our existence is part of our vocation. We do not have to “do” anything to achieve a calling. We can simply be the person we are created to be and thus respond to God's gift of love for our unique life.

The way that we live in relationship to other people is part of our vocation. We do not have to choose a certain role in society or in the church to qualify as having a calling. The commitments we make to share our lives—as spouses, parents, friends, neighbors, families, co-workers and colleagues —are different dimensions of the ways we are called by God.

The way we spend our time is part of our vocation. We do not need to have a particular profession to have it “count” as vocation. We can use the skills, gifts, and opportunities we have been given to serve others in a variety of ways that are faithful responses to God's call.

- 3) **Reflect on the three-fold definition of vocation.** Which of the 3 areas (who you are, how you live, or what you do) is clearest when you think about your calling?

Which of the 3 areas do you have the most questions or confusion about?

The three-fold nature of vocation can free us to see our life in a wider view. Our vocation is created by the unique and ever-changing constellation of our identity, relationships and work.

Seen from this perspective, we may begin to glimpse how our plans are part of God's plan. Not with the details of a map or the precision of a blueprint, but with the deeper promise of a relationship with the One who created and sustains us. Within God's plan for a future full of hope, we can make plans that help us to grow within our vocation—of who we are, how we live, and what we do—so that we can give our lives in service to others. Even when we stumble or choose not to follow the path that God reveals to us, we are welcomed back by God who promises to be found when we seek. So whether our plans fail or succeed, change or end, we are held within the hands of our compassionate God whose plans for the world are justice and love.

After the Meeting

Using the outline of lectio divina, return to the Scripture passage at the beginning of the session. Take a few minutes to reflect on your group's meeting and write your thoughts below.

Reflecting on your group's discussion, what insight did you receive—from others' stories or from sharing your own experiences—about how your plans fit into God's plan?

To read more...

For other stories of how our plans are embraced within God's loving plan:

- Jesus praying for God's will, not his, to be done: Matthew 26:36-46
- Zechariah and Elizabeth learning to trust in God's surprising call: Luke 1:5-24, 57-80
- Keeping confidence in God though you stumble: Proverbs 3:21-26
- Naomi and Ruth's journey together from despair to hope: Ruth 1-4
- Paul's perspective on his sufferings in light of Christ: 2 Corinthians 11:24-12:10

Session 3: Many Callings, One Life

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish."

Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.

Mark 6: 30-43

Praying

Using the outline of lectio divina, reflect on the Scripture passage above. Then take a few minutes to reflect on the question and write your thoughts below.

Where do you find yourself in this story? Are you like the hungry crowd waiting to be fed? Are you like the stressed-out apostles wondering how to care for yourself and everyone around you? Are you like Jesus trying to take time for yourself but still wanting to do your work? Describe which person(s) you identify with today:

Reflecting

We tend to think this is a story about the feeding of the five thousand. But it is also a story of feeding the frantic, frenzied apostles who were feeling pulled in a thousand directions at once, the ones who were so busy they barely had time to eat.

The disciples had many callings: to be faithful to their work, to take care of those entrusted to them, and to care for themselves. Likewise Jesus has multiple callings: to lead his disciples, to teach the crowds, and to tend to his own needs for rest and prayer. This Gospel passage is a story of a day when all these different callings came together.

Many of us experience our own lives similarly. Roles and responsibilities draw us in all directions—towards family, friends, work, church and community. We use physical words to describe this inner struggle: we feel *pulled* or *stretched*; we try to *balance* or *juggle*; we become *pressed* for time or *burned out*; we feel *hungry* or *thirsty* or *aching* for something deeper to sustain us. How can we find a sense of peace amidst all these pressures?

- 1) **Make a list of all your various roles and relationships** (for example: spouse, parent, friend, neighbor, employee, volunteer, church member, etc.). Which of these roles or relationships is calling for most of your time and energy right now?

Perhaps you have never considered your role as a spouse or parent to be a calling. Perhaps you have never seen your professional work or your volunteer involvement in the community as a vocation. But God can call us in many directions, to different people and different places.

Vocation is rarely one single, clearly defined role. Instead it is usually a blend of relationships, work, activity, obligations and passions. Vocation involves the ways we are sent out like the disciples to serve those who hunger and to share the gifts, skills, and opportunities we have been given.

But even if we do consider both our professional work and our personal relationships as callings, we can still struggle to live out the day-to-day demands of where we feel called. Some people respond to these competing demands by compartmentalizing their lives. But it can be frustrating to feel like a different person at work than who we are at home or with friends. Many of us want a deeper sense of authenticity; we do not want to lead divided lives. All our callings—our various roles and relationships—reveal something about where we invest our time, our energy, and our love. We want them to feel connected and integrated.

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

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

The alternative to a balanced life is a faithful life. It is a life faithful, moment by moment, to the God in whom we live and move and have our being. It is a centered life. The perfect example of the faithful life is Jesus Christ. Jesus often worked long hours despite the objections of his disciples, and at other times he withdrew from people and tended to his own needs for rest, reflection, and prayer.

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

Jesus offers an important model for navigating our many callings. He understood how vocation fundamentally calls us to work for justice and serve others out of love. At times his life felt out of balance and he knew he needed to take time for prayer and rest. At other times he threw himself into his ministry and drew energy from this life-giving work. But he kept his callings—as teacher, leader, and friend—centered in God even when they were unbalanced in terms of time or energy.

- 2) **Return to your list of roles and relationships.** Where does your life feel most unbalanced between multiple callings? How could the idea of a “centered life” provide a new perspective on this struggle?

As this story from Mark’s Gospel reminds us, Jesus always looked with compassion on those who needed him and fed them with what he had. He looked up to heaven, blessed what he had been given (even when it seemed small and not enough) and shared it with those in need. He depended on prayer and the power of God to carry out the difficult work of love and service that his own vocation demanded.

But prayer and generosity were not the only sources of support for Christ’s multiple callings. Jesus also asked his disciples to take the food and distribute it. He did not take on every single responsibility that came before him, but he asked for partners in his work and for help when he needed it. The radical work of living out the Gospel is never meant to be done alone or by a few: instead it insists that together we seek out those on the margins and invite them into God’s love in turn. As he modeled for his apostles, Jesus shows us how to live a centered life: a life made of multiple callings that can unite in service to others and faith in God.

Sharing

When you meet with your small group, the following questions will be discussed:

- 1) From your list of different roles and relationships, share two or three that you consider as callings. How do you experience God in this work or relationship?
- 2) Where does your life feel most unbalanced today? How could the idea of a “centered life” provide a new perspective on this struggle?

After the Meeting

Using the outline of lectio divina, return to the Scripture passage at the beginning of the session. Take a few minutes to reflect on your group's meeting and write your thoughts below.

Reflecting on your group's discussion, what insight did you receive—from others' stories or from sharing your own experiences—about how vocation can involve multiple callings?

Watch one of the *Lives Explored* videos (we suggest Angela's or Adam's story):

<http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-seminars/resources-for-congregations/lives-explored/>

What part of your own experience do you hear affirmed or challenged in this person's understanding of relationship between their various callings?

To read more...

For other stories about how God calls us in multiple ways:

- Jesus' encounter with Mary and Martha: Luke 10:38-42
- Paul's emphasis on the unity of our life's calling: Ephesians 4:1-6
- Lydia's call to conversion, leadership and hospitality: Acts 16:13-15
- The variety of gifts the Spirit gives for the common good: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 and 12:27-31
- Abraham and Sarah receiving a new calling in old age: Genesis 18:1-15

Session 4: Struggles & Challenges

Elkanah had two wives; the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year after year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?'

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: 'O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.'

As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, 'How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.' But Hannah answered, 'No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.' Then Eli answered, 'Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.' And she said, 'Let your servant find favor in your sight.'

Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

1 Samuel 1:2-18

Praying

Using the outline of lectio divina, reflect on the Scripture passage above. Then take a few minutes to reflect on the question and write your thoughts below.

Hannah felt called to be a mother and was deeply troubled by her infertility. Think of a time when you struggled with pain, loss or suffering in one of your callings and cried out to God. What words would you use to describe how you felt towards God? (For example, you may have been angry or sad, frustrated or resentful, doubtful or troubled.)

Watch one of the *Lives Explored* videos (we suggest Francois' or Angela's story):

<http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-seminars/resources-for-congregations/lives-explored/>

What part of your own experience do you hear affirmed or challenged by this person's understanding of God in relation to struggles and challenges they faced?

Reflecting

All of our lives are touched by painful experiences, times of challenge, or significant loss. Because suffering is part of the human condition, our vocations are shaped by the struggles we face. Every calling given to us by God will eventually be marked by difficulties, doubt or despair. These challenges do not necessarily mean that we are not called, but instead that we must grow in our understanding of how God is still present to us in our grief, anger or pain.

When we look back at the three-fold definition of vocation, we see how our vocations can be affected in profound ways by suffering. Who we are, how we live, and what we do are each impacted by situations of stress or struggle. Our multiple callings do not exist in isolation from each other. Therefore pain or loss is one part of vocation—our identity, our relationships, or our work—can impact the others in turn. For example, hardships related to our job may impact our sense of identity as well as our relationships with family and friends outside the workplace.

For Hannah, her calling to be a mother was shaped by her years of infertility. Eventually she was able to conceive and gave birth to her son Samuel. But all three parts of her vocation as a mother—her identity, her relationships, and the everyday work of raising a child—were forever changed by the experience of suffering as she waited for a baby. The story of how she poured out her anguish to God at the temple reminds us that the path of vocation is not always smooth but a winding road through obstacles and times of darkness.

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

- 1) Think back on a time of pain, grief or loss in your own life. **How did this experience of suffering challenge your faith in God?**

As difficult as they can be to bear, times of darkness do not mean an absence of God's call. Sometimes if we reframe our understanding of how vocation relates to suffering, we gain a new perspective on how God has been calling us all along.

Consider how changing the preposition that is used with the verb of "calling" can transform its meaning:

- We can be **called in** a difficult situation: to act in a certain way or to have a particular attitude. Even if we cannot change the circumstances, we can respond in ways that allow our vocation to flourish. For example, people suffering from serious illness sometimes surprise their families and caregivers with the positive perspective they are able to develop—virtues of compassion, patience, or gratitude.
- We can be **called away from** a situation—whether an abusive relationship, a toxic workplace, or a negative environment. Though it can be painful to leave, God sometimes asks us to do the difficult work of closing a door and moving on.
- We can be **called for** something, as we come to see a purpose greater than our own comfort or happiness. Perhaps we can become a companion or mentor for others grappling with the same difficulties, as people sometimes do after they have lived with depression, addictions or eating disorders. The fundamental Christian call to discipleship always beckons us towards those most in need of God's love and light.
- We can be **called to** a new part of our vocation as a result of loss or difficulty, as our eyes are opened to a new possibility, opportunity or way of thinking. For example, a couple who has lived through years of infertility may find themselves called to adopt or foster a child. Experiences of pain or loss can bring a deeper sense of empathy with others or gratitude for other gifts we have received.
- We can be **called by God in** the suffering we experience. We feel moved to respond by doing what we can to change the painful situation or to bring new life from an experience of loss. For example, a person may change careers or take on a new volunteer opportunity once they have experienced the loss of a loved one or witnessed first-hand the suffering that comes from extreme poverty. God can work through our anger, frustration or sadness to create something positive.

- 2) Pick one of these prepositions and share an example of a time that you felt called—**in** a struggle, **away from** a difficult situation, **towards** something new, or **for** a deeper purpose than you first thought. What unexpected opportunities, deepened awareness, or surprising gifts did this painful experience ultimately hold for you?

Sometimes it comforts us to see how God may be calling us through the difficulties we face. At other times we simply have to take on a challenging responsibility—like caring for an aging parent or staying in a difficult job—without having any sense of being called. And sometimes, in life’s most difficult experiences of loss, illness or death, our suffering often seems far too painful or unjust to be meaningful. Our struggle to understand why this is happening to us may lead us to wrestle with God or even lose faith.

These dark moments of questioning our vocation may change our understanding or image of God. For example, after a divorce, someone may wonder why or if God called them to marriage in the first place. When a child is stricken with a life-threatening illness, the parents question how a loving God could possibly allow this to happen. The events of our lives, as well as the sufferings caused by evil and injustice in the world, can pose deep challenges to our view of vocation and of God.

But the obstacles we meet through times of crisis may eventually be found to reveal God’s presence, too. Hannah met God in the rawest moments of her grief and anger, pouring out her feelings at the temple. And Eli the priest assured her that God had heard her cry and desired for her to find peace. So, too, does the God who calls us remain the God who hears us.

Even when the road grows dark and the way is no longer certain.

Sharing

When you meet with your small group, the following questions will be discussed:

- 1) Share an example of a time of pain, grief or loss in your own life that affected your faith in God. How did this experience change your understanding of how God works in your life?

- 2) Share a story of a time that you felt called **in** a struggle, **away from** a difficult situation, **towards** something new, or **for** a deeper purpose than you first thought.

After the Meeting

Using the outline of lectio divina, return to the Scripture passage at the beginning of the session. Take a few minutes to reflect on your group's meeting and write your thoughts below.

Reflecting on your group's discussion, what insight did you receive—from others' stories or from sharing your own experiences—about how God can call in struggles or suffering?

To read more...

For other stories about how God calls in times of struggle:

- How God meets us in our suffering: Psalm 107:1-32
- Moses' despair and God's call to continue leading his people: Exodus 17:1-7
- Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law who then gets up to serve: Mark 1:29-31
- A prayer for help in times of pain and difficulty: Psalm 22
- Jesus' call to the crowd to take up their cross and follow him: Mark 8:31-35
- How God calls through and beyond our present suffering: Romans 8:18-39
- Jesus calling his followers into new relationships after his death: John 19:25-28

Session 5: Changes Over Time

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Praying

Using the outline of lectio divina, reflect on the Scripture passage above. Then take a few minutes to reflect on the question and write your thoughts below.

When you reflect on this long list of “times,” which one speaks to your life right now?

Reflecting

The author of Ecclesiastes describes life as a changing rhythm of seasons. This theme of times and transitions resonates with what we know of life's ups and downs. It also mirrors what we see in the natural world as the seasons cycle through the year. Our callings change over time following their own rhythm. In some seasons of life, family relationships are primary; in other seasons we focus more on our work or service in our community. Even within the day-to-day flow of navigating our multiple callings, we are reminded that there is a time for everything, if we view our vocation in light of God's guidance.

As we grow into our callings, we learn that vocations are rarely a smooth, straight line from point A to point B. Instead, most people's lives take many twists and turns, stops and starts, in terms of vocation. We may have seasons when our sense of calling feels strong and other times when we feel lost or confused. Sometimes one calling may end and a new one begins; sometimes we may have to say "no" to an opportunity that arises. There are numerous transitions within our vocations themselves: our friendships mature, our marriages evolve, our careers shift. But all these changes—and the questions, doubts, fears and joys they bring—are part of the reality vocation.

- 1) **Imagine your life in the past as a river.** Try to picture how your river would look. Where have been the twists and turns? Where were the boulders or the rapids? Where was the calm after the choppy waters? When did your river flow fast and strong, and when did it slow to a trickle? If you wish, sketch out a picture of your river or note down a few lines about how you imagine it:

Now imagine your river going forward into the future. Where do you imagine it will flow or turn? Will it speed up or slow down? What new directions might it take? Again, you may either sketch out how your river might look or simply write down a few ideas:

As reflected in the image of a flowing river, vocation is a dynamic reality that evolves throughout the length of our life, from youth through middle age, from retirement through the elder years. Each stage of life brings new challenges and callings: when we start school, finish college, take a first job, become parents, switch careers, care for an aging parent, enter retirement, lose a loved one, or experience health problems.

All aspects of our vocation can change over time: our work, our relationships, and our identity. The world around us continues to change, and as we open our eyes to see injustice and our ears to hear the cries of the poor, our response will emerge as we ask how to serve.

But we are not left alone to navigate these transitions when our river twists and turns. We are given people to accompany us: the companions and communities that guide us through vocation's changes. Through these people, God journeys with us through each stage of life and continues to call us to new work, new relationships, and new aspects of our identity.

- 2) When you look at your life going forward from today, **where do you feel that God might be calling you towards something new?**

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

The lifelong journey of living our God-given vocations is not a puzzle to be figured out “once and for all.” Instead, vocation involves a willingness to enter into an ongoing dialogue with God and others that is always evolving. And since God often calls us through other people or communities, we are constantly being invited to respond to our changing contexts and circumstances, the changing needs of the world, and new opportunities that come our way. In the words of Ecclesiastes, there is “a time for every matter under heaven.”

Across our lifetime, the people and the communities who call us will change—from parents and teachers to friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, and even strangers in need. Hopefully we can come to see how there are many ways in which we can serve God through serving others through a variety of callings, our whole life long. Our willingness to hear these changing calls and to respond with openness, creativity, and love is a sign of our growth in vocation.

Now that you have reached the end of *Called to Life*, consider some of the aspects of vocation that you have explored:

- Vocation is a relationship with God, a dialogue of listening and responding.
- Vocation is personal: it looks different for each of us, with our unique gifts and circumstances, in our particular contexts.
- Vocation is for others: we offer our gifts in service to help those in need and enrich the lives of those around us.
- Vocation relates to our whole life: who we are, what we do, and how we live. It includes our work, relationships, passions and identity.
- Vocation can be both bigger and smaller than we often imagine. It includes the big picture (the ultimate meaning of our lives) and the daily details (our everyday decisions).
- Vocation is lifelong. It is a changing reality that evolves over the length of our life.

3) Reflect on how your understanding of vocation has changed through *Called to Life*. **What is one thing you have learned about your calling? What is one question you still have about your calling?**

After the Meeting

Using the outline of lectio divina, return to the Scripture passage at the beginning of the session. Take a few minutes to reflect on your group's meeting and write your thoughts below.

Reflecting on your group's discussion, what insight did you receive—from others' stories or from sharing your own experiences—about how God's call changes over time?

Watch one of the *Lives Explored* videos (we suggest Sherice's or Peg's story):

<http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-seminars/resources-for-congregations/lives-explored/>

What part of this person's story makes you wonder about your own future in relation to your callings?

To read more...

For other stories of God calling over time:

- Paul on how we mature in faith by growing up into Christ: Ephesians 4:11-16
- Patience in waiting and watching for God's vision to be revealed: Habakkuk 2:1-3
- God's faithfulness from youth through old age: Psalm 71
- Jeremiah called by God as a youth: Jeremiah 1:4-10
- Anna and Simeon experiencing a call fulfilled at the end of their lives: Luke 2:25-38
- Peter describing the evolution of his calling: Acts 10:34-48

Looking back, looking ahead

Through the journey of *Called to Life*, you have hopefully started to see how the God who created you cares how you spend your life, use your gifts, and serve the needs of those around you. You have started to explore how the different ways that God works in your life can be understood as God's "call" to you. You have spent time reflecting on how you can respond to God through the different ways you serve others through your relationships, work, and other gifts of your time and energy.

One of the goals of *Called to Life* was to broaden your understanding of how God calls so that you can learn to look for God in the everyday—not just the extraordinary—moments of invitation to serve others. Because vocation is centered in our relationship with God and relies on our human abilities to understand the divine, God's call in your life may never be crystal clear. But what matters is keeping your eyes, ears and heart open to the ways God may be reaching out to you.

Now that you have finished *Called to Life*, you may have even more questions than answers about vocation. But you can hopefully name ways that your view of God's call has changed as well.

Perhaps through the past few weeks you have gained a new or surprising perspective about your calling or relationship with God. No matter how small this insight may seem, keep bringing your questions to God in prayer. Your openness to vocation as an ongoing conversation with God can help nurture a lifelong relationship of listening and responding.

As you go forward, you may wish to continue praying with *lectio divina* by reading a short Scripture passage and reflecting on how God is speaking to your life today through these words. You might also want to explore further reading on vocation. (See the next page for suggested resources.)

No matter what you do to continue discerning your calling, we encourage you to keep talking with others about questions of calling and the deeper meaning of our lives. These practices can deepen what you have begun in your small group. Because the work of discovering and deepening a sense of vocation is the journey of a lifetime.

*May God bless you with ears to listen to the still small voice.
May you have strength to follow Christ's call to be his disciple.
May you discern the Spirit's bountiful gifts showered upon you.
And may you live a life of service for others, in joy and gratitude.*

To learn more about vocation and calling:

Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward. *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991.

Jack Fortin. *The Centered Life: Awakened, Called, Set Free, Nurtured*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.

John Neafsey. *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.

Parker Palmer. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

For more resources on *lectio divina*, see Christine Valters Paintner and Lucy Wynkoop, *Lectio Divina: Contemplative Awakening and Awareness*. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2008.

For more resources on how to practice the listening approach used in *Called to Life*, see Diane M. Millis, *Conversation—the Sacred Art: Practicing Presence in an Age of Distraction*, Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2013.

More resources from the Collegeville Institute Seminars:

Called to Work. This is the companion track to *Called to Life*: a 6-session series for small groups that focuses on professional work as calling. All materials are available online at <http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-seminars/resources-for-congregations/called-to-work/>

Calling: The Blog of the Collegeville Institute Seminars. Our staff blogs regularly on resources related to vocation and calling: <http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-seminars/insights/>

Lives Explored: Our video narrative project captures a variety of real-life perspectives on vocation from Christians in all walks of life. We regularly add new videos at <http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-seminars/resources-for-congregations/lives-explored/>