



Called to Life Facilitator Guide

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A Program of the Collegeville Institute Seminars

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Welcome

Thank you for deciding to lead a *Called to Life* group and walk with others on their journeys towards a deeper understanding of God's call.

This program was created by the Collegeville Institute Seminars to encourage conversations around calling. It has two tracks: *Called to Life* explores vocation in relation to our whole lives, while *Called to Work* focuses on the calling to professional work. We hope that this experience of facilitating a small group will enrich your understanding of God's call in your life as you lead others into reflection on their own sense of vocation.

The Facilitator Guide was created to provide background material and useful resources for your work as a facilitator. Just as *Called to Life* participants report a more meaningful experience if they invest time in the readings and reflections of the Participant Guide, so do facilitators enter more deeply into the process of *Called to Life* if they set aside ample time to prepare for each meeting.

As you work to create opportunities for others to reflect on their sense of calling, the staff of the Collegeville Institute Seminars is available to assist your efforts and provide other resources you may find helpful. We welcome your questions, comments and feedback as you facilitate this program.

Thank you,

Laura Kelly Fanucci, Research Associate
Director, *Called to Work* and *Called to Life*, Collegeville Institute Seminars

Introduction: Sharing Our Stories

Listening to people share their stories of faith reveals that there is **no single way in which people experience God's call**. While some assume that vocation means following a divine blueprint, few people actually experience their life as neatly planned by God. It is more common to hear people speak about vocation as the ongoing search for meaning and purpose. Some experience God's call in and through the needs of others—vocation as a responsibility or a duty. Others discern their purpose through their God-given gifts, skills or talents that can be used for the sake of others—vocation as a call to service. Some people are more comfortable with the idea of a general call to Christian discipleship or witness, while others feel strongly that they were given a specific calling to a particular kind of work or relationship.

But most people struggle with the very idea that they could be called by God. Perhaps this is because the concept of vocation has historically been tied to ordained ministry in many Christian traditions. Perhaps it is because Scripture's stories of call are often dramatic and unlike what most of us experience in our relationship with God. While many people long for clear divine direction, the vast majority of us experience vocational journeys filled with twists and turns, stops and starts. We often have more questions than answers, more doubts than certainties.

Our stories of vocation—of work and relationships, passions and interests—are full of struggles as well as joys. We are people “on the way”: searching for meaning, wrestling with God, responding to changes, and seeing in retrospect the path of our vocation. Much like God's own nature, our vocations often remain a mystery as we look ahead. And yet we are still drawn to discover the purposes for which we were created, to discern and follow God's call, to find guidance and support as we make major life decisions.

For these reasons, ***Called to Life* uses the power of personal stories to explore the concept of calling.** Our individual narratives provide testimonies to the reality and diversity of vocations today: who we are as women and men, called by God to life and work in the world. Stories help us to notice and name what is important about our lives and how God is working among us. Stories surprise and inspire, affirm and challenge. Sharing stories bonds people and creates a stronger sense of community. Storytellers receive greater clarity as they put their experience into words, and listeners gain perspective as they notice patterns, similarities and differences with their own stories. Humans are natural storytellers: stories are how we make meaning and come to understand the world around us. Stories are also sacred revelations of how God works in everyday human lives.

As experienced ministers will testify, learning through stories is an **effective approach to adult education and faith formation.** Storytelling honors both knowledge and emotional understanding. It is accessible to all, regardless of education or background. It creates a hospitable, non-threatening environment for conversations about faith. And it connects us to the stories of Scripture that remain at the core of who we are as Christians.

As the facilitator helping others to explore questions of vocation, we invite you to **keep your own story at the heart of this journey**. Working through the reflections in the *Called to Life Participant Guide* will help you to journey with the members of your group through their exploration of the questions. While your role as facilitator is to create a safe and welcoming space for others to share their stories, there may be times when examples from your own experience can open up the conversation or illustrate a point for the group. We invite you to honor and explore your own story as part of your work as facilitator.

I felt a deep, inner urge to tell my story to others...
out of an awareness that my deepest vocation
is to be a witness to the glimpses of God
I have been allowed to catch.

—Henri Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror*

Getting Started: Vocation

The idea of vocation touches upon life's most important questions. How do we find meaning and purpose in the way we spend our days? How can we live out multiple commitments to work and relationships? How can we lead an authentic, integrated life of faith in the world today?

In our work with congregations we have found that many Christians struggle with the theological language of "vocation" or "calling." Yet people often respond positively to frameworks *about* vocation and calling that provide new ways to think about these ideas.

Here are **two frameworks about vocation** that are woven throughout *Called to Life*:

A 3-fold definition (seen in Session 2):

Vocation is a central part of the Christian life, encompassing:

- » **who we are called to be**—the core of our identity, as created by God and 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.

Prepositions of vocation (seen in Session 4):

As a theological concept, vocation has received renewed attention in recent years, expanding beyond traditional definitions of ordained ministry to include the diverse ways we are called:

- **by** the God who created us
- **to** particular kinds of work and relationships
- **as** the people we are, with our gifts, talents and resources
- **in** a variety of circumstances, whether joyful or difficult
- **from** difficult situations or times of transitions
- **through** the example, invitation or mentoring of other people
- **for** the service of others
- **within** the life of God who is love

Called to Life: The Essentials

Background & Purpose

Vocation is the focus of two of the Collegeville Institute Seminars' ecumenical, interdisciplinary, collaborative seminars. The **Seminar on Vocation, Faith and the Professions** studies how Christians view their professional work in relation to their faith, and the **Seminar on Vocation Across the Lifespan** explores how a sense of calling emerges and changes from childhood through the elder years. Theologians, social scientists, and ministers in both seminars are working on a theology of vocation that will speak to the lived realities of Christian faith today.

When the Seminars started in 2009, it became clear that not enough attention has been paid to vocation in the congregational setting. Little theological writing, church programming or training of ministers exists to consider the contexts and challenges of vocation, such as professional work as calling or retirement as a time of vocational discernment. While programs on vocation are available for college-aged young adults, there are far fewer opportunities for children, youth, older adults, retirees or the elderly to reflect on God's callings. Many Christians who long to understand God's call for their lives have been left to do so largely on their own.

As a response to this situation, we developed **two small group programs** to help people in congregations engage questions of calling related to faith, relationships, work, and identity. When *Called to Work* was piloted in 2011, we found that participants needed greater clarity around vocation in relation to the whole of their lives before they could dive into the idea of professional work as calling. We created *Called to Life* to provide a general introduction to the concept of vocation, while *Called to Work* continues to focus on professional work in light of God's call. The two tracks share a similar format and can be used sequentially or independently, depending on a group's interests.

We hope that *Called to Life* will inspire people in congregations and other settings to explore questions of calling together and create opportunities for thoughtful reflection and lively conversation about what it means to be called—and to respond—in the midst of daily life.

Structure and Format

Called to Life offers six sessions for small groups to gather for conversations around vocation. The introductory session orients participants to the approach and practices of the program. The five sessions that follow each focus on one aspect of vocation and explore a story from Scripture that illustrates a different way that God calls.

SESSION	TEACHING ON VOCATION	WAYS GOD CAN CALL	SCRIPTURE
Introductory Session	Introduces the 4 main practices of <i>Called to Life</i> : praying (lectio divina), sharing (small group conversation), reflecting (with the Participant Guide), and listening (to one's self, to others, and to God)	Through Scripture Through others' stories Through personal reflection and prayer	Deuteronomy 30:11-15, 19-20
How God Calls	Introduces the concept of discernment and the multiplicity of ways that God works in our lives	Through the many ways God communicates in our lives (e.g., prayer, nature, Scripture, music, work, dreams, conversation, silence, and other people)	1 Kings 19: 11-13
Our Plans & God's Plan	Relates the concept of providence to vocation: how our plans exist within God's larger plan of love. Offers a three-fold definition of vocation: who I am, how I live and what I do	As the people we are To relationships, work, and other activities of service	Jeremiah 29: 11-14
Many Callings, One Life	Introduces the idea of multiple callings and reframes the quest for a balanced life with the idea of a "centered life"	For others In multiple directions To a life centered in loving service to others and to God	Mark 6:30-43
Struggles & Challenges	Uses prepositions of vocation to consider how our callings are shaped by suffering	In, away from, to and by the challenges and struggles we face	1 Samuel 1:2-18
Changes Over Time	Explores the dynamic nature of vocation as an evolving relationship with God across the lifespan	Throughout the length of our lives In new and changing ways	Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

The format of *Called to Life* is based on small groups of 6-8 participants that meet for approximately 2 hours each week for 6 weeks. Before and after group meetings, participants reflect on questions and short readings in the *Called to Life Participant Guide* in order to deepen their personal engagement with the topics covered.

Lives Explored video storytelling project:

In addition to the *Called to Life* and *Called to Work* programs for small groups, we offer a video storytelling series called *Lives Explored*. On our website and YouTube channel, you will find a collection of stories from Christians in all walks of life sharing their experiences of God's call in their lives: www.lives-explored.com.

We invite you to use these video clips when appropriate for your group, as a conversation catalyst to open your small group meeting. The Participant Guide also encourages participants to watch one video before or after each meeting, as another way to reflect on the questions of each session.

The *Lives Explored* project is ongoing, so we will continue to add stories to diversify the personal backgrounds, professions, and perspectives shared. We hope the storytellers will help invite your group to share their own stories openly and honestly, and to reflect on what they can learn from others' experiences.

Collegeville Institute Seminars Contact Information:

The *Called to Life* and *Called to Work* programs are directed by Laura Kelly Fanucci, Research Associate for the Collegeville Institute Seminars. For questions or concerns, please contact Laura at lkfanucci@collegevilleinstitute.org.

For more information on the Collegeville Institute Seminars, please visit our website at <http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-seminars>.

Mailing Address: Collegeville Institute
 PO Box 2000, Collegeville, MN 56321

Responsibilities of the Facilitator

Facilitators have **five responsibilities**: organize the group, prepare for meetings, facilitate meetings, provide feedback, and follow up with Collegeville Institute Seminars staff.

1. Organize the group

- The goal is to **gather a group of 6-8 participants** in order to encourage a dynamic exchange of ideas and experiences. Groups may be larger, but the ideal for small groups is to have a manageable size for conversation and sharing.
- Participants may be found either by invitation or by open sign-up. The **Overview** document on page 22 can be used for promoting *Called to Life* and introducing participants to the program.
- Groups may be composed of people of different ages and walks of life: a typical cross-section of a congregation. Or facilitators may decide to target specific groups (for example, retirees or young adults) in order to explore questions of vocation in different phases of life.
- Facilitators are responsible for **regular communication** with group members. When emailing participants about meeting time and location, facilitators can also include a quote or short reflection related to the next session topic to remind participants to turn to their Participant Guide before the meeting.
 - While all participants may not be available to attend every session, facilitators should aim to **gather a minimum of 5 participants** in order to hold a meeting. The small group experience depends on each individual's commitment to participate regularly, as the **"Covenant of Commitment"** (page 31) emphasizes. Remind participants that their presence and contributions are valued by the group. Certainly life intervenes and people may be unable to make a meeting, but the facilitator's encouragement of active participation can sustain the group throughout the program.
 - Facilitators should also explain to participants that they may record general observations during the meeting for the purposes of feedback for Collegeville Institute Seminars staff. The **"Covenant of Commitment"** explains to participants that no personal or confidential information will be shared in the facilitator's feedback.

2. Prepare for meetings

- A key part of your preparation as a facilitator is **prayer**. We invite you to hold the group's members in prayer before and after your meetings together. Trust that the Spirit is at work as the group opens up and becomes a community of support for each other.

Be open to surprise: where or how God's presence may reveal itself to the group. Prayer will help sustain your own service as the group's facilitator.

- Preparing for group meeting also involves **background reading and reflection**.
 - We invite you to work through the **Participant Guide** along with your group, so that you are familiar with the prayer, reading, and reflection they will do before each meeting.
 - We have also compiled a **brief bibliography of suggested resources** related to each session for facilitators' background preparation. (pages 23-24). All readings are available online from our password-protected page for facilitators. Once you register for the program (at www.called-to-life.com), you will automatically receive the password to access the facilitator resources.
- Facilitators will choose an **opening and closing prayer** or reflection for each meeting. These prayers help to introduce the session topic and keep the *Called to Life* experience grounded in prayer.
 - Since participants will be learning the prayer practice of *lectio divina* through the Participant Guide, facilitators may wish to use this prayer practice at group meetings as well. A brief description of **Group Lectio Divina** and **Guidelines for Participants** are included on pages 25-26. You may wish to use the same Scripture passage that participants will have reflected on for their personal *lectio divina* for the session, or you may choose another passage from the list of suggestions at the end of each session in the Participant Guide.
 - The **Suggested Resources on Vocation** offers additional prayers and poems that may be used as opening or closing reflections for group meetings. Feel free to use other reflections that you may know, connecting to the liturgical season, the congregation's community life, or current events.
 - A collection of **Blessings for Vocation** (page 27-29) is also included. These blessings work well as closing prayers for group meetings.
 - You may also wish to use a video from the **Lives Explored video story-telling project** as an opening or closing prayer, to offer participants another example of Christians talking about their sense of God's call in their lives. All the videos can be found at www.lives-explored.com.
 - A Word document entitled "**Session Handouts for Participants**" is available for facilitators. This document has a handout for each session with the discussion questions and space for facilitators to insert an opening or closing prayer. Please email lkfanucci@collegevilleinstitute.org for a copy of this document available for your adaptation.

3. Facilitate meetings

- The **opening prayer** is an important part of each meeting: a centering activity that allows participants to slow down and set aside the day's work and worries. Be mindful of this important time: the tendency can be to rush into the discussion questions but taking time for prayer is essential to this work of exploring God's call. Regardless of how you choose to open the meeting in prayer, **spend a few moments together in silence** before beginning. Invite participants to turn off their phones or other devices, close their eyes, breathe deeply, and become aware of any emotions or tensions they are holding in their body, mind, or heart. This focus helps people to become present to God and to each other.
- Following the opening prayer, the facilitator may wish to **begin with a short "check-in"** time as participants settle in. At the first group meeting, this is a natural time for introductions. For later meetings, the facilitator may wish to ask a simple question as a way to invite everyone to check in briefly. For example: "Where did you experience God's presence in the past week?" or "How did you continue reflecting on something that we talked about during our last meeting together?" It may also be helpful to offer a short recap of the previous meeting in order to reorient participants to what the group has previously discussed.
- The facilitator then **guides the group through the discussion questions** for the meeting. Suggestions for guiding the group's conversation are offered in the section below (page 15).
- Remember to allow enough time for the **closing prayer or reflection**, honoring the importance of framing the group's time together in an awareness of God's presence.
- At the end of the meeting, thank participants for coming, make any "nuts and bolts" announcements, and invite the group to hold each other in prayer until the next gathering. Draw attention to the readings and reflection questions in the Participant Guide for the next session.
- Remind participants that the *Called to Life* experience assumes that participants will spend time each week in personal reflection and prayer guided by the Participant Guide. This **commitment of time** is essential to explore the depth of the topic of vocation. Facilitators have told us this is an important point to emphasize with participants: even in the midst of your busy lives, the more time and energy that you can invest into this experience, the more you will get out of it. *Called to Life* is only one step in the ongoing journey of vocation, but it can be a fruitful experience if participants give themselves the gift of time and attention.

4. Provide feedback

- At this time, we are happy to be able to offer *Called to Life* materials free of charge for interested congregations. In turn we ask that facilitators provide us with feedback to continue improving our programs.

- Following each session, please visit the *Called to Life* website (www.called-to-life.com) to complete a short form with two questions about your group's meeting:
 - 1. What question or idea from this session most resonated with the group?**
 - 2. What question or idea from this session was most challenging for the group?**
- Facilitators do not need to give a detailed account of what was shared during the meeting. We are interested in key insights, questions, examples or challenges that emerged because we want to learn how participants think about vocation and what questions they bring.
- A **final evaluation for participants** is available on the website and in hard copy (page 32). Please allow time at the group's final meeting for participants to complete this evaluation, since their feedback offers valuable insight for the development of our program.
 - We prefer that participants complete [the online evaluation form](#), but if you use written evaluations please send the completed forms to:
 Laura Kelly Fanucci c/o Collegeville Institute
 PO Box 2000, Collegeville, MN 56321

5. Follow up with CIS staff

- We invite you to be **in contact with our staff** throughout your work as facilitator. Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns, or how we can be of further assistance to you.
- Following the conclusion of your group meetings, a member of our staff will contact you to **invite your feedback**: what worked well, what didn't, and what suggestions you have as we go forward with the program.
- We also invite you to **imagine what future steps could be taken in your congregation** to continue engaging questions of vocation.
 - It may be helpful to **meet with your pastor or other staff** to report on your experience of leading the group. Sharing your findings can encourage the development of opportunities within your congregation, for example, preaching on vocation or exploring future adult education offerings.
 - At your final group meeting, you may wish to **ask participants to imagine what they could do**—as individuals or as a group—to continue efforts and conversations around vocation within their community.
- For groups who are interested in further exploring the meaning of vocation in their lives, we offer the companion program *Called to Work* which invites people to explore vocation in relation their professional or paid work.

More information on *Called to Work* can be found at www.called-to-work.com.

Suggestions for Facilitating

- Your role as facilitator is to help the group listen to themselves, to each other, and to God. You do not need to be an expert on vocation or a professional counselor. **Facilitating does not mean teaching.** You do not need to have all the answers to participants' questions.¹
 - If someone looks to you for an answer, turn the question back to them or to the whole group: "That's a great question; what's your feeling about it?" or "I'm still wondering about that myself; I'd love to hear what others think."
 - If participants have questions they wish to pursue further, you may suggest additional readings or resources on vocation. Or you may refer them to outside professionals if appropriate (pastor, therapist, or spiritual director).
- **Feel free to adapt the program to the needs of your group.** You may decide to focus on certain discussion questions instead of others or to change the order of questions. Be flexible to the needs and interests of participants.
 - For example, the discussion questions in *Called to Life* alternate between language of "calling" and "vocation." Facilitators should feel free to use whatever language they feel works best for a given group. Conversation around the vocabulary of vocation can be an important first step for participants, but we do not want language to be a stumbling block for groups as they explore the issues involved.
- **Encourage personal sharing** and examples from participants' own experience instead of general statements. Invite people to bring their Participant Guide to meetings in order to keep their sharing grounded in the reflection they did as preparation.
 - While your role as facilitator usually means that you will not participate in group discussion in the same way as a participant, you may find times that you need to **lead with an example from your own life** if participants are struggling to answer a particular question. Your model of authenticity, openness, and vulnerability can help to open up discussion for the group in this way, though you should always feel free to exercise discretion in the personal examples or experiences you share.
- Part of your work as a facilitator involves helping participants in your group to **become good listeners**: to "listen with the ear of your heart" as the Rule of St. Benedict says. Stories of vocation are sacred, and we can learn much from each other if we listen with open ears and hearts. As the facilitator, your role is to moderate the group dynamic in order to make all feel welcome and comfortable. Some people tend to dominate conversations; others are more introverted and need to be invited to share. The following suggestions may help in your efforts:

¹ Several suggestions for facilitators are inspired by the work of Whitney Wherrett Roberson in *Life and Livelihood: A Handbook for Spirituality at Work* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2004).

- The “**Guidelines for Small Group Discussion**” (on page 30) are a useful tool for groups to discuss at the first meeting and return to later in the program. Given the personal nature of questions around vocation, it is important to keep the meeting atmosphere as open and comfortable as possible.
- Review with your group the difference between **conventional and contemplative questions** (in the Introductory Session in the Participant Guide). One of the most effective ways of calling forth deeper reflection is through the questions we ask. When we listen to each other, most of us are used to asking “**conventional questions.**”
 - Conventional questions tend to keep our conversations on the surface. Such questions don’t require much reflection, so they do not deepen our exploration of how God is at work in our lives. In most cases, conventional questions can be answered with yes, no or in a few words. For example: “Have you tried talking to your boss/spouse about this situation?”
 - Conventional questions tend to focus on what we want to know in order to satisfy our own curiosity: “Why are you considering divorce?”
 - When we ask a conventional question, we may have an answer in mind: “Why don’t you start looking for another job?”
- By contrast, *Called to Life* provides an opportunity to practice what author Diane Millis calls “**contemplative questions.**” Contemplative questions are open-ended questions designed to deepen our discovery of how God is at work in our lives.
 - Contemplative questions typically cannot be answered quickly, since they invite us to pause and pay attention to what is taking place within us. For example: “How do you imagine God might respond to your concern?”
 - Contemplative questions are asked for the sake of the other as an expression of our care for them: “What experiences have you had in the past that might shed light on your relationship?”
 - When we ask a contemplative question, we do not know what another person’s response will be: “What are you finding to be life-giving at this time?”
- As participants share their stories, invite them to listen without comment or interruption. After a participant has finished sharing his or her story, encourage the rest of the group to pause and consider how to respond to what they have heard. Rather than analyzing what has been shared, giving advice, or trying to solve someone’s problem, ask them to imagine how they might ask a **contemplative question** to invite the storyteller to reflect more deeply upon their lived experience in order to discern how God may be at work. (For more on conventional vs. contemplative questions, see Diane Millis’ book in the Suggested Resources section.)

- Aim to keep the conversation balanced between the different perspectives in the room. If one or two people are dominating, you may wish to **offer the following questions to open up the discussion:**
 - “John and Mary have a lot of ideas about this question. Does anyone have another perspective to offer here?”
 - “I wonder if anyone else has a thought about this question or an illustration of what they have been talking about?”
 - “Has anyone had a different kind of experience?”
 - “Are there other ways of looking at this?”
- Encourage participation to the extent that each participant feels comfortable. **Acknowledge each person’s contributions**, thanking them for their willingness to share. Passing on a question is always an option; no one should feel pressured to share or respond. But sometimes a gentle invitation can **draw quieter participants into the conversation:**
 - “Ann, you seem thoughtful today; do you want to jump in here?”
 - “Tom, did you want to add anything?”
 - “Can you say a little more about that or share an example from your own experience?”
- Suggest that participants **fight the temptation to rehearse in their head what they will say when their turn arrives**. Instead, encourage them to listen attentively to each person and to trust that God will lead them to speak their own truth when the time comes. Remind them that the *Called to Life* experience involves not just telling our own stories, but learning how God works through others’ stories, which often gives insight into our own lives in turn.
- Facilitators sometimes find themselves faced with a participant who comes to a meeting simply needing to talk or to unpack a pressing issue in their life. Depending on the circumstances, you may want to allow the group time to listen and respond more in depth to this person. Or you may want to acknowledge the issue, ask if the group can move on with the meeting topic at hand, and then talk to the person in private afterward. Following up with a phone call or email after the meeting is another option for serious or sensitive issues that a participant may raise during the meeting time.
- **Learn to honor the times of silence** and allow space for pauses in the discussion. Such moments can either be a sign that the group is ready to move on to another question or simply that they need more time to think. After a moment or two, ask if people are ready to move on before jumping into another question.

- **Keep an eye on the clock to respect the meeting time frame** and help the group stick to their time commitment in honor of everyone's busy schedules. There will always be more to say about the topic than the time will allow, but these conversations are meant simply to invite the first word on the subject.
- If your group does not have time to fully answer each of the discussion questions, invite people to reflect on any remaining questions when they return to the Participant Guide for their reflection after the meeting.

Resources for Facilitators

(Electronic versions also available from lkfanucci@collegevilleinstitute.org)

1. **Theology of Vocation: Five Characteristics** page 20

In this short essay, Kathleen Cahalan (Director, Collegeville Institute Seminars) outlines five characteristics of contemporary theology of vocation as it is being developed in the project's two seminars on vocation.

2. ***Called to Life* Overview** page 22

This overview may be adapted for promotion or to introduce *Called to Life* to potential participants.

3. **Suggested Resources on Vocation** page 23

Organized by session, these readings for preparation and reflection are available for download online.

4. **The Practice of Group *Lectio Divina*** page 25

Based on the traditional individual prayer of *lectio divina*, this outline describes how facilitators can use this prayer practice in a group setting.

5. **Guidelines for Group *Lectio Divina*** page 26

Copies can be given to participants to lead them through the prayer practice in the group setting.

6. **Blessings for Vocation** page 27

Facilitators may reproduce these blessings individually for participants to use as closing prayers for meetings.

7. **Guidelines for Small Group Discussion** page 30

8. **Covenant of Commitment** page 31

9. **Participant Evaluation Form** page 32

Theology of Vocation: Five Characteristics

Kathleen A. Cahalan, Director, Collegetown Institute Seminars

Through our research and reflection on vocation, we have identified **five common themes** in popular and academic literature that serve as a foundation for the theology of vocation developing in the project.

First, vocation is a call from God that is **relational and dialogical**. God is the source of vocation, but human persons must hear and respond to that call through dialogue with God. God's call is experienced commonly in four ways through:

- an inner voice, often defined as conscience;
- the gifts of the Holy Spirit;
- divine providence, the way God cares and guides creation and history;
- other people such as family and friends as well as strangers, the poor and those in need—all who call us to service.

Second, vocation relates to a Christian's **whole life**. It does not refer to a part of life (work) or one type of work (ministry) or one type of life (religious community and celibacy). Vocation encompasses a **multiplicity of callings**: who I am, what I do, and how I live. It is dynamic and changing, not static or linear, not fully determined or preset at the outset of life.

Third, vocation is a call both **general and specific**. The general call is shared by all Christians to follow in the way of Christ, described through categories of service, discipleship, love, the gospel, and the commandments. But vocation also refers to the specific ways in which we live out God's call in marriage or single life, service and work. The particularity of our callings is also determined by contextual factors such as gender, class, history, opportunities, and social location. These specific aspects of vocation are the least developed by authors today (e.g., marriage, grandparent, woodworker, economist, dean).

Fourth, vocation relates to my whole life, **my whole life long**. It is not just an issue for young adults but for every age: children, teens, young adults, adults, those facing retirement, and the elderly all face vocational questions particular to their life's journey. There needs to be further reflection on vocation across the life span, especially as it relates to human experiences of suffering, sin, and loss, as well as discovery, change, creativity, joy, and relationships.

Finally, vocation relates to **service and self-giving in community**. It is social and communal, not an individual experience or issue. It is mediated and discerned within community, and it is given by God for the sake of community. Vocation also requires sacrifice, obedience, and the demand to listen to the needs of others and the world.

In contemporary theologies of vocation we see a movement away from specific denominational definitions toward approaches that speak to the broader Christian community. We see a rejection of vocation understood as a MapQuest search, a divine microchip, a hidden secret, or a blueprint, though many people may still carry these notions of vocation. While theologies of vocation understand God's call to be more nuanced, complex, and contextual, many people have not been given the opportunity to reflect on vocation through new theological lenses.

Called to Life Overview

*Have you ever asked yourself, “What’s the meaning of my life and my work?”
Do you feel pulled in multiple directions—work, family, and other commitments?
Are you wondering where God might be leading you next?*

Explore these questions in **Called to Life**, a new opportunity for small groups to gather for conversation about our callings:

- » How to listen for God
- » Why we are all called to serve others
- » How challenges and struggles shape our sense of calling

Overview of Called to Life:

- » Join us for conversation and prayer about God’s call in each of our lives
- » Small groups will meet on *(day of week)* at *(time)* from *(beginning date)* through *(ending date)*
- » No cost for participants!
- » Receive a free Participant Guide for personal reflection and prayer

Why participate?

- » Deepen connections between your faith and everyday life
- » Build relationships with others from your community
- » Explore Scripture and learn a new prayer practice
- » Listen to others’ stories and gain perspective on your own questions

For more information, please contact (facilitator’s name) at (phone number/email):

Called to Life is a program of the Collegeville Institute Seminars, a project of the Collegeville Institute located at Saint John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota. The Seminars are an interdisciplinary, ecumenical effort that brings together scholars and ministers to explore important issues for today’s Christian communities, seeking to develop resources for congregations that speak to the lived realities of Christian faith in the world today.

For more information, please visit <http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-seminars/>

Suggested Resources on Vocation

To access these resources, please register your group at our website to receive the password to our protected page for facilitators.

Introductory Session

Background reading for facilitator:

- Diane Millis. *Conversation—The Sacred Art: Practicing Presence in an Age of Distraction*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2013. Ch. 2-3, Appendix.

Suggestions for opening or closing reflection:

- *Lectio divina* on [Deuteronomy 30:11-15, 19-20](#) (Participant Guide p. 6)
- Video from *Lives Explored* video story-telling project: www.lives-explored.com

Session One: How God Calls

Background reading for facilitator:

- Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward. *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991. Ch. 1, 3.
- "Discerning God's Call" by Jennifer Grant Haworth in *On Our Way: Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life*. Edited by Dorothy C. Bass and Susan R. Briehl. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2010.

Suggestions for opening or closing reflection:

- "Prayer for Discernment" by Thomas Merton, In *Thoughts In Solitude*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958 .
- Rumi, "The Guest House" (translation by Coleman Barks)

Session Two: Our Plans & God's Plan

Background reading for facilitator:

- Douglas J. Brouwer, *What Am I Supposed to Do with My Life? Asking the Right Questions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans: 2006, Ch. 1-2.
- Parker Palmer. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000. Ch. 1-2.

Suggestions for opening or closing reflection:

- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ. "Patient Trust" in *Hearts on Fire, Praying with Jesuits*. Michael G. Hartner. Chicago: Loyola Press, 1993.
- Howard Thurman, "Center Down"

Session Three: Many Callings, One Life

Background reading for facilitator:

- Jack Fortin. *The Centered Life: Awakened, Called, Set Free, Nurtured*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006. Ch. 1.

Suggestions for opening or closing reflection:

- William Stafford, "The Way It Is"

Session Four: Struggles & Challenges

Background reading for facilitator:

- John Neafsey. *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006. Ch. 7.

Suggestions for opening or closing reflection:

- John O'Donohue, "For Suffering". From *To Bless the Space Between Us*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2008.

Session Five: Changes Over Time

Background reading for facilitator:

- Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead. *Christian Adulthood: A Journey of Self-Discovery*. Liguori, MO: Liguori, 2005. Ch. 2 and 3

Suggestions for opening or closing reflection:

- Mary Oliver, "The Journey"
- Wendell Berry, "Sabbath 1999, VI" from *Given*

The Practice of Group *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina, or “holy reading,” is an ancient practice from the Christian tradition, dating from the early medieval era of prayerful study of Scripture in monasteries. *Lectio divina* is a slow, quiet, and thoughtful encounter with Scripture. Reading and responding to 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.

Based on the image of Jacob’s ladder, a twelfth century Carthusian monk named Guigo II described four steps of *lectio divina*: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). Through these four steps, God’s Word sinks deeper into our hearts and imagination.

Facilitators may wish to use *lectio* with a Scripture passage or poem as an opening or closing prayer for the group’s meeting. A version of this prayer outline for participants is included on the following page. To begin:

- » Ask for three volunteers to read the Scripture passage.
- » Invite the group into prayer with a few moments of silence.

We listen to God’s Word for the first time.

- » We listen for a word or phrase that God will speak to us today.
- » We reflect in silence.
- » We share aloud the word or phrase that spoke to our heart.

We listen to God’s Word for the second time.

- » We reflect in silence on what God may be saying to us through the word or phrase that spoke to our heart.
- » We share aloud what this word or phrase means to us.

We listen to God’s Word for the third time.

- » We reflect in silence on how God may be calling us to act through the word or phrase that spoke to our heart.
- » We share aloud how we feel God may be calling us to respond.

We thank God in prayer.

- » The facilitator closes with a prayer thanking God for this encounter with the Word.
- » Or each participant may be invited to offer a short prayer of thanksgiving.

Guidelines for Group *Lectio Divina*

- ▶ Make yourself comfortable as you settle in for a time of quiet prayer. Breathe deeply to settle your body and your mind, becoming aware that you are in God's presence.
- ▶ Listen to the first person read the Scripture passage aloud. Spend a few moments in quiet reflection on the passage. What word or phrase speaks to your heart? When the group is invited to share, **speak that word or phrase aloud.**
- ▶ Listen to the second person read the Scripture passage aloud, keeping in mind the word or phrase that first spoke to you. Spend a few moments in quiet reflection on what God may be saying to you through this word or phrase. When the group is invited to speak, **share what this word or phrase means to you.**
- ▶ Listen to the third person read the Scripture passage aloud. Spend a few moments in quiet reflection on how God may be calling you to act through the word or phrase that spoke to you. When the group is invited to speak, **share how you feel God may be calling you to respond.**
- ▶ Our group will close our practice of lectio divina with a prayer of thanksgiving for our encounter with God's Word.

“Listen with the ear of your heart.”
—*Rule of St. Benedict, Prologue 1*

Blessings for Vocation

Closing a group meeting with a blessing over participants can be a fitting end to the sacred time of sharing stories of calling. The following blessings were written by Collegeville Institute Seminars staff.

Shorter blessings may be prayed by each participant over the person next to them in turn. Remind participants to use the person's name at the beginning of the blessing. You may wish to insert "(name)," at the start of the blessing if you print out copies for the group.

Longer blessings may be prayed over the whole group at once, either by the facilitator or one of the participants.

*May vocation be the source of your life in God.
May the callings of your life be centered in Christ.
May the work you are called to do be enlivened by the Spirit.*

*May God's call for your life shine through how you live.
May God's call for your life flow through what you do.
May God's call for your life dwell in who you are.*

*Follow your true callings,
Renounce your false self,
Give your life to the gospel,
And take up your gifts for the sake of others.*

*When you hear a call, may you awaken to God's voice.
When you awaken to God's voice, may you say yes.
When you say yes, may you follow faithfully.
When you follow faithfully, may you give your life away.
When you give your life away, may God's people be blessed.*

*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.*

*When God calls at home, may you respond with love.
When God calls at work, may you share your gifts in service.
When God calls through change, may you grow with grace.*

*May you trust that God calls you
through questions as well as clarity,
through people as well as prayer,
through closed doors as well as open paths.*

*When God calls and you say "no,"
may God open your ears and change your heart.
When God calls and you say "maybe,"
may God nudge you closer to your true self.
When God calls and you say "yes,"
may you listen and embark on the journey in faith and joy.*

—Inspired by Marie Theresa Coombs and Francis Kelly Nemeck, Called by God

*May God the Creator who made you bless you.
May God the Son send his healing to you.
May God the Holy Spirit move within you
and give you eyes to see, ears to hear,
and hands to do your work.
May you walk and preach the word of God to all.
And may the angel of peace watch over you until we meet again.*

—Adapted from a blessing from St. Dominic

*May you be filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding.
May you bear fruit in all the good work that you do.
And may you be made strong
by the power of the Divine Spirit within you.*

—Adapted from Colossians 1:9-11

Guidelines for Small Group Discussion

Called to welcome others as Christ. According to the Rule of Saint Benedict, all people are to be “received like Christ.” We invite you to give and receive welcome by your words and actions towards others in the group.

Called to keep confidentiality. Vocation is a deeply personal topic, and we respect the sacredness of our stories: our fears and failures, sorrows and successes. The circle of the group provides a space that is open to share within, but closed from sharing outside.

Called to share and to keep silent. As we read in Ecclesiastes, there is “a time to be silent, and a time to speak.” No one is ever forced to respond to any question. We honor the right of each individual to decide when he or she feels called to share.

Called to honor each voice. We invite you to share from your own unique story. No individual speaks for an entire group or a whole profession. This is a space to set aside competition and to celebrate the different ways God works in each of our lives.

Called to listen with the “ear of your heart,” according to the Rule of Benedict. This is a space for listening and learning from each other, not for critiquing or offering advice. While the group may provide support, we are not here to “fix” or “save” each other. Offer questions instead of counsel.

Called to reserve judgment and turn to wonder. Whenever people interact, disagreements naturally arise. But we invite you to turn from judgmental attitudes which stifle communication, to an attitude of wonder which opens the heart: *“I wonder why this person feels this way. I wonder why I feel such a strong reaction. I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself.”*

Called to respect our differences. Our time together is a conversation, not a debate. We invite you to learn from others and from yourself, to tap the sources of wisdom in the group and in your own heart.

Called to be present to each other. We all lead busy lives; that is why our time together is so important. As much as possible, focus your attention and energies on being engaged with those around you.

Called to pray. When the group leaves from this space, we invite you to hold each other’s lives and stories in prayer until you meet again. Following the Benedictine rule of “ora et labora” (pray and work), we hope that your time together will enrich both your prayer and your work when you are apart.

Guidelines adapted from “Circle of Trust ‘Touchstones’” from the Center for Courage and Renewal. To learn more about the Rule of Benedict, visit the Order of St. Benedict: www.osb.org/rb

Covenant of Commitment

As a participant in *Called to Life*, I agree to:

- Spend time each week preparing for each session with the Participant Guide.
 - Follow the guidelines for small group discussion.
 - Participate in all group meetings. If circumstances arise that cause me to miss a meeting, I will notify the group in advance that I cannot attend.
 - Other additions agreed upon by the group:
-

I understand that *Called to Life* is a program of the Collegetown Institute Seminars, a project of the Collegetown Institute at Saint John's University in Collegetown, Minnesota. As this project seeks to learn how Christians understand their vocations, facilitators may record notes from *Called to Life* meetings to share with the project staff. General themes, observations, and stories from the group's meeting will be included in the facilitator's feedback, but no statements will be attributed to any individual. The staff will be using what they learn from *Called to Life* participants in their research, drawing insights across the conversations as well as drawing on stories to share in their writings. Participants' privacy will be upheld through anonymity, and the confidentiality of the group will be respected, in order that participants feel that they can share openly. The facilitator's feedback, as well as feedback from participants' final evaluations, will help to develop further resources for congregations through the Collegetown Institute Seminars.

I agree to participate as a member of the *Called to Life* program.

Signature

Date

Called to Life Participant Evaluation

Thank you for participating in *Called to Life*! We hope the experience has been meaningful for your journey of vocation. We welcome your feedback as we continue to improve the program.

What impact has *Called to Life* had on your **understanding of vocation**? (Choose one)

- High impact
- Moderate impact
- Low impact
- No impact

What are some ways your understanding of vocation has been impacted?

What impact has *Called to Life* had on **your own life or work**?

- High impact
- Moderate impact
- Low impact
- No impact

What are some ways your life or work has been impacted?

What was the **most** memorable or meaningful session for you?

- Introductory Session
- How God Calls
- Our Plans & God's Plan
- Many Callings, One Life
- Struggles & Challenges
- Changes Over Time

Why was this session the most memorable or meaningful?

What session was **least** applicable or meaningful for you?

- Introductory Session
- How God Calls
- Our Plans & God's Plan
- Many Callings, One Life
- Struggles & Challenges
- Changes Over Time

Why was this session the least memorable or meaningful?

What is one significant thing you learned about vocation through *Called to Life*?

What is one question you still have about vocation?

Any additional feedback, questions or concerns: