



Called to Work Participant Guide

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A Program of the Collegeville Institute Seminars



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Called to Work

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

As you explore different aspects of work and 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 work and how it connects to our faith. We hope that by exploring questions of vocation, you will learn more about the meaning of your work:

- What is my sense of God's calling in relation to my work?
- How can I learn to listen to God's call?
- How does my work serve others?
- How have challenges and struggles shaped my work?
- How is my sense of calling changing over my lifetime?

Over the next few weeks your small group will gather for conversations around work and 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 in the readings and questions before and after the meeting.

Vocation is the story of our lives. We hope that *Called to Work* will help you to enter more deeply into your own story by exploring the deeper meaning of your work. 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 and your work.

*"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 Work?

One question that people sometimes ask when starting *Called to Work* is “Does my work count as a calling?” If you are a stay-at-home parent or a student, if you are retired or unemployed, you may wonder if your circumstances fit our definition of work.

The answer is yes. No matter your professional situation or stage of life, we all work. **Work is the purposeful activity, whether paid or unpaid, that fills your days and nights, whether in the workplace, home, or wider community.** So perhaps you run a household, raise small children or care for your aging parents. Maybe you have a 9-to-5 job or volunteer at your church. All of this falls under the category of work.

In *Called to Work* we especially hope to help people explore how their professional work may be a calling from God. Many people are hungry to find meaning in their jobs—where they spend most of their time—and professional work is a part of life that often doesn’t get attention at church.

Since we are interested in connections between profession and vocation, we use language in *Called to Work* that relates to paid work, such as “career,” “clients” and “co-workers.” If these terms don’t apply to your work, we invite you to substitute words that are more meaningful, such as “service,” “volunteering” or “caregiving.”

The goal of *Called to Work* is to help you see how God is at work in your work—how God is calling in your life.

*“...through work we realize ourselves as image-bearers of God;
through work we participate in God’s ongoing creative activity;
through work we follow Christ in his example
of redemptive suffering for the sake of others;
through work we serve God himself
as we serve those with whom he identifies.”*

—Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work*

What is a Calling?

As you begin *Called to Work*, 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 Work*, 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 Work*.

- » 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 Work*:

- » **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 Work*.

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 Work*. 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 work 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 work 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 Work 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 work? Do you feel frustrated that your work feels disconnected from your faith or other relationships in your life? 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 Work***:

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 Work*. 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 Work* 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 Work 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: www.lives-explored.com.

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 Work*?**

Session 1: Work in Our Lives

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was.

Then the Lord called, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and he said, ‘Here I am!’ and ran to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But Eli said, ‘I did not call; lie down again.’ So Samuel went and lay down. The Lord called again, ‘Samuel!’ Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call, my son; lie down again.’ Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’

—1 Samuel 3:1-10

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.

Samuel’s words—“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”—open him up to God’s call for his life. Using Samuel’s model, what would be your words to God as you begin *Called to Work*? (For example: “Lead, Lord, I am wandering,” “Help, Lord, I feel lost,” or “Look, Lord, I am here.”)

Reflecting

Work is a huge part of our lives: it structures our schedule, sets our priorities, and becomes closely tied to our identity. Work is where we spend most of our time as adults. But the story of how you came to the work you do today likely started years ago, back when you were a child. What you saw and heard about work when you were young helped to shape your ideas and expectations.

Think back to when you dreamed about what you wanted to be when you grew up. Maybe you wanted to be a doctor so you could help sick people. Perhaps you dreamed of playing professional sports or exploring the universe as an astronaut. Or maybe you pictured doing exactly the kind of work you're doing now.

1. Make a list of professions or jobs you dreamed about when you were a child or teenager.

What attracted you about each job?

Now think back on how you chose your current profession. The people who influenced you—family, friends, teachers or mentors who encouraged (or discouraged) you. The skills, talents or interests you hoped to use. The responsibilities that motivated you: paying the bills, supporting your family, or helping others. Whether you entered your profession after careful deliberation or simply fell into your line of work, you have a story to tell about how you got started.

2. Describe briefly how you became part of your profession. What people played an important role? What gifts did you have for this work, or what responsibilities motivated you?

These two stories—what you wanted to be when you grew up and how you became part of your profession—are helpful places to start exploring God’s call in your life. Looking closely at your own experiences can shed light on two ways that God may lead you to your vocation: through your dreams and through other people.

How God calls: through our dreams

Look back over your responses to question (1). The list of “what I wanted to be when I grew up” can often reveal deep truths about what sets your heart on fire, where God first grabbed your attention. Are there any connections between this list and your current work? If you had a dream of helping people as a doctor or firefighter, how do you help others through your work now? If you wanted to be a professional athlete or a movie star, have you channeled this energy and passion into your current job? God calls us all life long, as the story of Samuel’s call in childhood shows us, so we should not be too quick to dismiss our childhood dreams.

As adults, the dreams through which God calls may not be a literal dream that wakes us in the night, but instead a hope or longing of the heart. The dreams you have about work as an adult—whether a hope to help others in need, a desire to provide for your family, or dreams about retirement—can be ways that God continues to call you, placing desires deep in your heart. Maybe you had a nagging desire for more fulfilling work that led you to consider a career change. Or maybe your dream of owning a business kept you going through the tough years of getting started. Through the hopes of your dreams, God can sustain you during challenging seasons of work or nudge you to consider whether it is time for a change. This is all part of being called to vocation.

As you prepare to meet with your small group, reflect on the dreams of work you had as a child. Then think about the dreams you have for your work as an adult. Imagine what dreams God might have for your life in turn. The place where our dreams meet God’s dreams can be the place of vocation—working to use our gifts in service to others.

How God calls: through other people

Look back over the Scripture passage that starts this section. We often think of Samuel’s story as a classic “call story” from Scripture: a booming voice from heaven, waking someone in the night, calling him by name. But this story is also about how God calls through other people. Samuel never would have been able to understand or respond to God without the help of his wise teacher. Eli turned Samuel’s ear to help him figure out that the mysterious call that was coming from God—the call that ultimately led the young boy to become a judge, prophet and leader of his people.

God’s call of vocation often comes through other people. Reread your answer to question (2). Chances are that other people—whether friends or teachers, a parent or a mentor—played a big role in how you got started in your profession. Whether they noticed a talent you had, encouraged you to study a certain subject or gave you a first job, other people have had important influence on your work.

As you reflect on the story of how you started your professional work, consider how the advice, opportunities, or encouragement that people offered you may have been ways that God was calling. Perhaps a teacher pointed out your gifts, an employer opened a door of opportunity, or a friend discouraged you from a job that would not be a good fit. All of these can be examples of God working through others to guide you towards your vocation.



Even if you have never explicitly asked for God’s guidance in choosing a profession or finding a job, God has always been at work in your work. This is what it means to have been created by a loving God that promises to be active in your life and seeks to care for others through your hands. And this is also the heart of vocation: that God invites each of us—sometimes through our dreams, sometimes through other people—to share our gifts and meet the needs of those around us.

Sharing

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

1. Share one or two of the jobs you dreamed about when you were young. What attracted you about each job?

2. Tell a story about how you decided to become part of your profession. Who played an important role? What gifts did you have for this work? What responsibilities motivated your decision?

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 works through other people or our dreams?

Watch one of the *Lives Explored* videos (we suggest Ken's or Lauren's story): www.lives-explored.com.

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

To read more...

For other stories of how God calls through other people or through dreams:

- Joseph the "master dreamer": [Genesis 37-45](#)
- David called through Samuel's anointing: [1 Samuel 16](#)
- Joseph called through his dreams: [Matthew 1-2](#)
- Lydia's conversion through Paul's words: [Acts 16:13-15](#)

Session 2: God at Work

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon,

"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

—Luke 5:1-11

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.

Imagine God showing up in the middle of your work day. What part of your work would God appreciate or understand?

Before your group meeting, watch one of the *Lives Explored* videos (we suggest Sherice's or Adam's story): www.lives-explored.com. What part of your own experience do you hear echoed or challenged by this person's understanding of God's invitation in relation to their work?

Reflecting

Work is far from foreign to God. Many stories in Scripture use images of God as worker. God the Creator is described as a gardener, potter, metalworker, midwife, artisan, and builder. Jesus labors as a carpenter before he starts his work of preaching, teaching, and healing. The Spirit of God works to renew the face of the earth and breathe new life into God's people. In this passage from Luke's Gospel, Jesus is at work teaching the crowds when he meets the disciples in their own work of fishing. So God is no stranger to work: its joys, its challenges, and its central place in our lives.

Yet we often overlook the daily details of our work—its activities, responsibilities, conversations and encounters—as being ways that God could encounter us. We may struggle to see the meaning of our work in the eyes of God. What do the meetings and phone calls and emails and deadlines of our day have to do with God?

The story of Jesus calling the fishermen invites us to look with fresh eyes at how everyday work offers opportunities to hear and respond to God's call. The fact that Jesus meets his future disciples in the activity of their work is no coincidence. As Simon, James, and John were in the middle of an ordinary day of fishing, Jesus used their work to reach out to them and continue his own work of drawing disciples to his ministry. So, too, can God the Worker work through your work.

To begin, think about the times that your work feels most energizing. Maybe when you help someone who needs it, put your skills to use or find a solution to a difficult problem. Noticing where you experience joy in your job can help identify your calling in relation to work, since such moments can be affirmations that you are using your gifts for God's purposes.

- 1. Describe where or when you feel most alive at work.** (For example: when you help others, when you are able to use your gifts and strengths, or when you think of how your work supports those you love.) Be specific.

Now reflect on moments when you have felt God's presence while at work. Maybe you prayed in preparation for a difficult meeting or thanked God for a meaningful conversation with a co-worker. Even if connections between your faith and your work feel few or far-between, chances are that you have experienced ways that God seemed to "show up" during a work day.

- 2. How have you experienced God's presence in the midst of your work?** (For example: through someone's words of affirmation, in a sense of peace after making a difficult decision, in the healing of a broken relationship, in an unexpected opportunity, or through an experience of growth.)

How God calls: in work itself

When people think about connecting faith and work, they often think about *how* they work: the way they treat clients with compassion or show kindness to a co-worker. But God also waits to meet us in *what* we do. The activity of everyday work—the tasks you do, the people you meet, the projects you create—provide opportunities to hear and respond to encounter God's call of vocation.

Look back on your answers to (1) and (2). Depending on the particular nature of your profession or personality, you may find it easier to recognize God's presence in different aspects of work, whether moments of intense interaction or personal reflection. Consider the following examples of ways that God can call. Which of these examples apply to your work?

- **What we do:** God the Creator understands the energy, excitement, and hard work involved in creation, as well as the responsibilities of caring for what is created. Professional life requires creation as well as maintenance, innovation as well as upkeep. Whether in the frustration of never-ending paperwork or in the fulfillment of new projects, God invites us to create and to care for what we create. So the activity of our work can be part of our calling, even if we are not in a traditional “helping” profession that provides hands-on service to people.
- **How we think:** Every profession requires reflection: contemplation that precedes and follows action. God’s Holy Spirit works to inspire our thoughts throughout the day. As we accumulate experience on the job, we develop wisdom—a sign of God at work in our growth. The way that we think through our work can be a way for God to call us within the work we do.
- **What we say:** Throughout Scripture God works through words. Speaking was a significant part of Christ’s own work; he preached, taught and forgave people through what he said. Interactions with others are at the heart of professional work, too. When our work provides opportunities to speak, God can speak through our conversation to call us (and others) to a deeper understanding of the ultimate meaning of our work.

The idea of God calling us in the ordinary activity of our job does not mean that work will always be exciting, easy or interesting. But as we begin to look at our work through the lens of vocation, we may see how the complexity and particularity of our daily labor is part of God’s own complex and unique work. We are called by God—and can respond to God—in our work itself.

3. Name one way that you can connect with God through your work: in what you do, how you think, or what you say.

3. Name one way that you can connect with God in your work through what you *do*, how you *think*, or what you *say*.

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 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 can work in and through your work?

To read more...

For other stories of God meeting people at work:

- Jeremiah at the potter's house: [Jeremiah 18:1-6](#)
- The hard-working woman: [Proverbs 31: 13-26](#)
- Jesus meeting Zacchaeus the tax collector: [Luke 19:1-10](#)
- Jesus and the woman at the well: [John 4:5-42](#)

Session 3: Work's Challenges

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.'

Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'

So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' The Lord said to Moses, 'Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.'

I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.'

Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

—Exodus 17:1-7

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.

Tension is thick in this story: the Israelites are quarreling; everyone is complaining from thirst; Moses even cries out to God afraid that his people will stone him. When your work is full of tension and challenge, where do you turn for renewal and refreshment?

Reflecting

At its best, work can be a blessing and a source of joy. But even the most meaningful job can feel like a burden when paperwork piles up, deadlines loom and problems keep interrupting. Work can't be overly idealized or romanticized: it can become difficult and demanding. Sometimes it can be hard to reconcile the reality of our job with vocation's ideal of meaningful work that allows our gifts to flourish as we serve others.

But work's challenges can, in fact, be part of our calling. Even Moses, who was called by God to be a leader, suffered and struggled with what his calling demanded of him. But for Moses as for us today, God promises that "I will be standing there in front of you," even when the whole world seems to be quarreling or complaining or threatening around us. To understand the fullness of work as vocation, we need to reflect not only on its joys but also its challenges—the struggles that shape our labors.

1. Think back on a difficult period of your professional life. How did this experience affect your relationship with God? Did it make you angry, frustrated, or longing for God's comfort and guidance?

2. Have you ever felt God's presence in the midst of a frustrating work day? What did this feel like—a sense of peace, a source of comfort, or inspiration to see a situation in a new light?

When we think about vocation, we often focus on being called *by* (God) or called *to* (a profession, relationship, or place). But to broaden our understanding of how God may be calling in our lives, we can explore other ways that we might be called. Take a moment to reflect on the following prepositions. How might they change or expand your definition of vocation?

How God calls: away from

Sometimes God calls us away from work that is no longer life-giving. Whether a negative work environment or an unhealthy relationship, there are times when God leads us to turn away. When we reach the point where we can no longer do the good work that God calls us to do, God may call us *from*—although it may not yet be clear where we are called *to* next.

Yet even when a “call from” arises at a time of natural transition (for example, the birth of a child or the start of retirement), it can still be difficult to take leave of a calling. It helps to remember that while God calls us to work, God does not necessarily call us to a specific job. So we can remain faithful to our deepest call—our faith in God—even during the times when we are called away from someone, somewhere or something. As for Moses and the Israelites, called away from Egypt to an unknown Promised Land, God remains our faithful companion even when we are called to take leave.

How God calls: in

While a calling can bring joy and fulfillment, it also requires responsibility, sacrifice, and endurance. The truth about vocation is that we are not always called to something, or even from something. Sometimes we are called *in* situations, whether professional or personal, that are full of pain and hardship. We may have to do work that is not meaningful or a job that we do not like. We may become disillusioned with our profession or place of work. We may have to put professional goals on hold while we deal with difficult family situations or serious health problems.

But vocation asks us to remain open to God’s call in the place we find ourselves, no matter how hard that place may be. God can still work through us to enrich the lives of those around us, even in the midst of difficulty.

When faced with professional challenges or personal struggles, we do not always have the choice to change our circumstances or move on to something new. Illness, unemployment, and losses of all kinds are situations we cannot control that stress our work in significant ways. Even when we try to make a change happen—like a new job or promotion—it does not always come to pass, and we have to deal with the disappointment of doors being closed to us.

Yet our calling is not on hold during the difficult times. Even if we cannot change the situation, we can choose how we live within it by trying to respond to God’s call in the situation itself, by holding on to faith that God will not abandon us. God promises to be with us when we stay.

- 3. As you reflect back over your years of work, describe a time that you were called away from or in challenging circumstances related to your work.**

Viewing our work through the lens of vocation can help us to approach our struggles differently. Often a painful experience changes our attitude towards work; perhaps we become more compassionate towards others or we forgive ourselves for failing. Or our struggles may transform our understanding of work, as God works through our frustration to create something new.

Every vocation involves some suffering, and our callings will be shaped by the struggles we face. Just because work is part of our calling does not mean it will be free from stress or setbacks. But just as water flowed from the rock as a sign of God's faithfulness to the thirsty Israelites in the desert, God promises to be present with us in and through our difficulties. The God who created us for work is also our companion through work's challenges. Trusting that God will not abandon us in our struggles can free us to enter more fully into the work God invites us to do.

Sharing

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

1. Share a story about a difficult period of your professional life. How did this experience affect your relationship with God?

2. Have you ever felt God’s presence in the midst of a frustrating work day? What did this feel like—a sense of peace, a source of comfort, or inspiration to see a situation in a new light?

3. Share an example of a time that you felt called away *from* or *in* difficult circumstances related to work.

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 through struggles and challenges?

Watch one of the *Lives Explored* videos (we suggest Francois' or Jane's story): www.lives-explored.com.

What part of your own experience do you hear affirmed or challenged in this person's understanding of struggles in relation to their callings?

To read more...

For other stories about how God calls in and away from difficult situations:

- Jacob wrestling with God: [Genesis 32:23-31](#)
- God's faithfulness through distress: [Psalm 77](#)
- Jesus and the blind Bartimaeus: [Mark 10:46-52](#)
- Jesus' agony in the garden: [Matthew 26:36-46](#)
- Paul's sufferings: [2 Corinthians 11:24-12:10](#)

Session 4: Work, Service and Calling

And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

—John 13: 3-5, 12-15

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.

Think about the image of God as servant—a God who gets his hands dirty, who kneels and washes feet, who asks his friends to do the same. What is one way you serve others through your work?

Watch one of the *Lives Explored* videos (we suggest Denise's or Monica's story): www.lives-explored.com. What part of your own experience do you hear affirmed or challenged by this person's understanding of how they serve others through their work?

Reflecting

All the stories you have explored through *Called to Work*—stories of what you wanted to be when you grew up, where you feel most alive at work, how challenges have shaped your work—are, in fact, stories of vocation. They are stories of how you use your gifts to serve others, how you “wash one another’s feet” as Christ invited his disciples to do. These stories show how service is at the heart of vocation. Following the call to love our neighbor that all Christians share, a calling is not something we live only for ourselves, but for others.

Most of us understand this truth on a gut level, even if we’ve never thought about it. We work because we have responsibilities and obligations to help others, whether at work or at home. Frederick Buechner famously defined vocation as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” You might also think of calling as the intersection between your gifts and your responsibilities—what others need and what you have to share.

Now that you have spent time reflecting on your work and God’s call, think about how you would define your own calling. Is work your calling? Is work one of many callings in your life? Or does your work not feel like part of your calling?

Try the following exercises to help clarify your own sense of calling.

1. **Ask three people who know you well what they think your calling is.** Write their answers down below. Are you surprised by their responses?

2. Use the chart below to reflect on your own understanding of calling in relation to work.

Step 1: On the left-hand side of the chart, list some of the **work positions** you have held, starting with the most recent. (Feel free to include unpaid roles or volunteer positions.)

Step 2: On the top of the chart, list four or five of your **gifts**, whether they are strengths, talents, abilities or interests.

Step 3: In the middle boxes, write how you have used your gifts in each of your work positions. Feel free to leave boxes blank or with a question mark if you are unsure.

	Gifts				
Work Positions					

How God calls: for others

Look over the middle boxes of your chart. Very likely they reveal ways that you serve others through your work. This is the core of a calling: how you give of yourself to others in need. No matter how you define your vocation—whether work is your calling, one of many callings, or not part of your calling—service to others is at the heart, because God’s purposes for vocation are for each of us to help care for the good of all. Following Christ’s example of kneeling down and washing feet with love, we are called to give of ourselves in return.

But even though we share a common calling to service, we are each given individual gifts, specific responsibilities, and unique work through which to serve others. The beauty of vocation is found here: that God meets us within our particular kind of work, asks us to share the particular gifts we have been given, and opens our eyes to particular people in our community or world who need our service. While vocation might seem like a generic concept at first, it is the specifics—of helping *these* people, with *this* skill, in *this* workplace—that make our callings rich and meaningful.

How God calls: in many directions

Rare is the life that is focused on only one calling. Most people feel pulled in multiple directions, and even when all the demands on our time are good ones, the stress takes a toll on our well-being. Words used to describe this struggle reveal how physically demanding it feels: we *juggle* work and family, we feel *torn* between our job and the rest of our life, we try to *balance* many responsibilities. Vocation can provide the perspective we seek as we long for greater integration, when we remember that God asks us first and foremost to serve others through love, at home and at work.

In response to question (1), your friends, family or co-workers may have named parts of your calling that aren’t mentioned on your business card or résumé. Their answers reveal the truth that while vocation may include work, it is also broader than work. God’s call is not confined to hours spent at the office, but neither is it separate from the professional work where most of us spend the majority of our time. The service of others that lies at the heart of vocation likely calls you in many directions. Yet when your multiple callings are centered in service to others, you can find wholeness in your work, no matter how frantic your schedule might feel. Asking how your work serves others—how you continue to follow Christ’s commandment to love others in turn— is an important, ongoing step in discerning your vocation.

Considering work as part of vocation is not simply career counseling. Most people do not experience God giving them a divine blueprint for what job to take, how to switch careers, or when to retire. Yet God the Worker cares deeply about how we work and what we do. God has created us for work, for purposeful activity that cares for those around us and lets us share our gifts with those who need them. Our work is the service we offer out of love. So our work matters to God because it is done for others. No matter what job we take along the way, we can respond through work to the God who calls us.

Sharing

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

1. When you asked three people who know you well what your calling is, what did their answers reveal?
2. Name one way that you serve others through your work.
3. How would you define your calling: is your work your calling? Is it one of multiple callings in your life? Is work not part of 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 can call for others or in multiple directions?

To read more...

For other stories about how God calls for others or in many directions:

- God's call to justice: [Micah 6:6-8](#)
- Our call to be light for the world: [Matthew 5:14-16](#)
- Jesus and the rich man: [Mark 10:17-31](#)
- Paul on the gifts of the Spirit for the common good: [1 Corinthians 12:4-11](#)

Session 5: The Next Chapter

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, ‘My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.’ So they said, ‘Do as you have said.’

And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ Then one said, ‘I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?’ The Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.’ But Sarah denied, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid. He said, ‘Oh yes, you did laugh.’

—Genesis 18:1-15

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.

Have you ever been surprised by a change in one of your callings? Describe this experience.

Reflecting

We began *Called to Work* with the story of young Samuel's call from God. Now we read about Sarah and Abraham receiving a new and surprising calling in their old age. For years they had prayed for a child but had long left that dream behind them, thinking they were too old. Imagine how they must have felt when they realized what God was saying to them—no wonder Sarah laughed in disbelief!

Abraham and Sarah's story reveals an important truth about vocation: it is not carved in stone. Our calling is not something we figure out "once and for all" in young adulthood, when we decide what school to attend, what profession to pursue, or what job to take. Vocation evolves over our lifetime as God continues to call in new and changing ways.

Work is no exception, as it is full of transitions: starting a first job, moving up through promotions, losing a job, going back to school, changing careers, preparing for retirement. While the daily routine of making a living can sometimes feel monotonous, the truth is that our work is changing all the time.

One way to see how vocation changes is to think about calling from different perspectives, as in the prepositions we explored in the session on challenges. Often we focus on being called *by* God, but perhaps you have also been called *away from* work that was no longer life-giving, to a profession where you could better use your gifts to help others. Maybe you were *called* to a reprioritizing of work and family responsibilities. Maybe you were *called in* a difficult period at work to find the strength needed to persevere.

1. **Reflect on what is coming next for your work**—maybe a job promotion you are seeking, a change of career you are considering, or a transition that is challenging you. Where might God be calling you *in* your situation? *To* something or someone? Or *away from* something?

While God's surprising ways can seem clearer as we reflect back on our past, you may begin to see the path of vocation stretching out in front of you as you practice looking and listening for God's call.

Reflect on your life today: the transitions, personal or professional, that are impacting your work now and the changes that you see ahead on the horizon. Where might God be calling you next? Do the changes ahead feel like a promising possibility or a frightening unknown?

- 2. Write a short letter to God about your questions, hopes, and fears about the next stage of your life.** Tell God honestly how you feel about the changes ahead of you, whether personal or professional.

How God calls: unexpectedly

Sarah certainly never expected to have a baby in her old age; Abraham thought he would never be a father. Simon and his friends never planned to leave their fishing boats. But God called each of them to a new and surprising vocation. While Sarah and Abraham were going about their daily work, living a life of hospitality and openness in which they welcomed the mysterious strangers who appeared at their door, they receive an unexpected calling. God often appears in unlikely moments.

The unexpected ways that God has called in your life may not be as dramatic as these stories from Scripture. But surprising events and opportunities mark every career. Reflect on your responses to (1). As your work has changed in different ways, you likely experienced God's presence in ways you did not anticipate.

Almost every story of calling—whether the Scripture stories you read or the stories shared in your small group—reveals how God works in surprising ways. While a few people have careers that follow a straight trajectory, most of us have working lives full of stops and starts, changed directions or reverses, doubts and questions. Surprising twists make up most of the road of life.

The unforeseen aspects of vocation are not always welcome changes, although sometimes in retrospect we see how what seemed to be a dead end changed the course of our work for the better. But whether the changes to our callings feel positive or negative, our deepest call is to trust God through the transition and transformation.

All the Scripture stories we have explored show how vocation requires deep trust: Samuel's brave response to God, the disciples' willingness to follow Jesus, God's promise of faithfulness to Moses, Jesus' trust of God's plan, and Sarah and Abraham's acceptance of startling news. We have to lean into the mysterious unknown of God's call, trusting that God will be our companion on the journey.

How God calls: over time

Sarah and Abraham's story shows how God calls throughout our life, from youth through old age. Both Abraham and Sarah had responded to God in the past, but they now faced a very different calling as they looked ahead to the next stage of their life together. Professional life today is no different. Whether you are beginning work or nearing retirement, God continues to call you to share your gifts in service to others. Vocation is neither limited by age nor defined by job title.

Think back to the first job you took as a young person. It likely has little to do with the work you do today. You may have weathered unemployment or left the work force to care for family; maybe a move or promotion shifted the direction of your career. Looking forward there may be changes ahead—retirement redefining your work or a nagging restlessness to try a new profession. The fact that vocation is a lifelong reality means that God has been present in your journey all along, even during the dark and difficult times when it was hard to see. This is the promise of a loving Creator who longs to work through our work.

Look back on your answer to (2). When you think about work in the next stage of your life, you may feel excited or anxious. In different seasons of life, we embrace change with youthful exuberance or fear its challenges. But even in times of transition, God is still present in the unsettling space between taking leave and starting anew.

Transformation within vocation can be exciting but also painful: we cannot move forward without leaving behind. And callings always involve some loss or ending. Even as Abraham and Sarah delighted in the thought of becoming parents, they had to prepare to leave another stage of their life behind. God was calling them to new work.



Experience teaches us how vocations change as we grow. We are not the same person we were when we started working, and our relationship with God has changed, too. Part of our evolving sense of calling comes from the gift of maturity; our understanding of ourselves, our gifts and our work develops as we grow.

And the wisdom we gain over time can help us support others' callings in turn, just as the advice, opportunities, and encouragement we received shaped our own journeys.

Indeed, part of our Christian calling is to call forth others' vocations—whether our children or grandchildren, newer employees in our workplace, or the next generation in the church. This is what it means to be part of the Body of Christ: that as we change and grow in our callings, we continue to build up communities of support that keep our lives centered on the God who calls each of us.

Now that you have reached the end of *Called to Work* with your small group, consider some of the aspects of vocation that you have explored together:

- » 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 Work*. **What is one thing you have learned about your calling? What is one question you still have about your calling?**

Sharing

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

1. Share a story about a time you went through a change in your work, whether you were *called* away from a job, *called to* a new kind of work, or *called within* a difficult situation. How did you experience God in relation to this change?
2. Where do you think God may be calling you next? How do you feel about this change: is it a promising possibility, or a frightening unknown?
3. What is one thing you have learned about your calling through *Called to Work*? 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 a lifetime, in unexpected ways?

Watch one of the *Lives Explored* videos (we suggest Jean's or Peg's story): www.lives-explored.com

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 unexpectedly or over time:

- Jeremiah's uncertainty at God's call: [Jeremiah 1:4-10](#)
- Elijah discovering God in a "tiny whispering sound": [1 Kings 19:11-13](#)
- Naomi and Ruth's changing callings: [Ruth 1-4](#)
- Saul's conversion: [Acts 9:1-19](#)

Looking back, looking ahead

Through *Called to Work*, you have hopefully begun to see how the God who created you cares how you spend your life, use your gifts, and meet 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 realized how you can respond to God through the various ways you serve others through your work.

One of the goals of *Called to Work* 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 in exploring vocation is keeping your eyes, ears, and heart open to the different ways God may be reaching out to you.

Now that you have journeyed through *Called to Work*, 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 that will deepen the meaning of your work.

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.

*For we are God's servants, working together;
you are God's field, God's building.*

—1 Corinthians 3:9

To read more about work, vocation and calling

Bryan J. Dik and Ryan D. Duffy. *Make Your Job A Calling: How the Psychology of Vocation Can Change Your Life at Work*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2012.

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.

Mike Hayes. *Loving Work: A Spiritual Guide to Finding the Work We Love and Bringing Love to the Work We Do*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012.

James Martin, S.J., and Jeremy Langford. *Professions of Faith: Living and Working as a Catholic*. Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2002.

Parker Palmer. *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990.

Norvene Vest. *Friend of the Soul: A Benedictine Spirituality of Work*. Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1997.



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 Work*, 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 Life. This is the companion track to *Called to Work*: a 6-session series for small groups that explores calling in relation to our whole lives. All materials are available online at www.called-to-life.com.

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 www.lives-explored.com.