

Shaping a Faithful Life
A Curriculum on Discernment for Young Adults

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By Kathleen Henderson Staudt

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW: SHAPING A FAITHFUL LIFE

Session I: Discernment and Our Questions

For the facilitator:

When young adults hear language about "call" or "vocation" they tend to expect a conversation about "What are your plans for the future?" Or they may associate these terms with specifically religious professions and occupations, forgetting that the call to discipleship is part of the life of every Christian. In many stories in Scripture, the "call of God" comes to people right where they are, and it has something to do with where they are now in life, in terms of identity, relationships, faith and everyday life. Where we are going is always rooted in where we are now. Discernment -- the process of paying attention to the divine presence in our lives -- always begins in the "now". Always, its fundamental question is "where is God in this?" -- or "where do I find meaning and purpose in my present situation?" "How do I shape a faithful life, beginning where I am now?" There is no quick answer to this kind of question; rather, it gives rise to many other questions. The process of discernment is a process of identifying and asking the questions that can lead us to deeper understanding of where we are in the life of faith. This session introduces some of the fundamental questions that will guide our explorations of discernment, vocation and discipleship.

This first session is focused on community building: its purpose is to invite people to listen to each other and introduce one another, working with the questions that will be shaping our conversations in the weeks ahead, and to introduce the themes of discernment, vocation and discipleship that will be recurring over the coming weeks.

Resources for further exploration:

Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*.

Rainer Marie Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*. Norton. 1993.

Ben Campbell Johnson, *Hearing God's Call: Ways of Discernment for Laity and Clergy* (Eerdmans, 2002).

Scriptural Foundation: Mark 1:16-19 and Matthew 4: 18-22. The call of the Disciples

Commentary and background info on call stories in the gospels (see Background Materials for Session I)

Supplies: Nametags

Newsprint & markers

Writing materials for personal journaling/note taking.

Handouts with the 6 Questions and explanations (see appendix)

Background and guidance on Scripture passages

***Session I: Questions that Help us Shape a
Faithful Life***

Gathering:

Provide nametags, refreshments,

Open with Prayer: O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
"(BCP, pp.

Ask: When have you heard this prayer? Do you remember when? In the Episcopal Church -- we hear it on Good Friday, at the end of the solemn collects, after we have offered to God the church's prayers for the whole world. We hear it again at the Great Vigil of Easter, after all the readings, and just before the service of Baptism or Renewal of Baptismal Covenant. It is also offered at ordinations.

We begin with this prayer because it names what the church is for/about: it is about transformation --of our lives, and of the world.

We experience an invitation to that transformation, individually, each of us, in the experience of vocation -- being *called* to follow Jesus. Response to call of Christ is faithful *discipleship*. (Not just "joining a club --becoming a "member" -- but following a pattern/observing a practice that makes us available to carry on the work that God is doing in life, death, continuing resurrected life of Jesus). This means reflection on theology, practice, Scripture -- what difference it makes that we are Christians. Tonight I just want to float a few ideas and then invite you to try on some of the questions that I have come to think are important.

Invite "free association" sense from you about these words: "Vocation" --
"Discipleship" -- "Call/Calling" – Discernment.

What do people associate with these terms?

A working definition of "discernment": the process of paying attention to the divine presence in our lives.

Exploring (20 minutes):

Give out handout with the 6 Questions to guide our Discernment

Take about 10 minutes to reflect, on your own, on the first three questions -- don't think you'll fully answer any of them today -- but just what comes to mind, from where you are right now, in answer to each of them.

Which question is easiest for you to answer? Which is most challenging/confusing/frustrating?

Going Deeper (30 minutes)

Talk to a partner, about 10 minutes each--listen, because you will need to introduce people.

FACILITATOR: Write down notes on chart pad, especially on the "Profile" and "Purpose" answers.

Around the room, partners introduce each other to the whole group (or, if group is larger than 12, introduce each other in groups of 4.

What questions were hardest? Where do these questions connect or fail to connect

Note to Facilitator:

It's most important, in this first session, to build trust in the process of sharing. It is fine for people to interrogate the questions or substitute some of their own language. Do try to circle back to the first three questions, especially. But also feel free to let the conversation go, as long as people are sharing freely and getting to know each other. If there's more time, go on to "closing thoughts/Bible study" -- if not - save the Bible study for a future session.

Closing Thoughts: (30 minutes)

Read together the story of the calling of the disciples in Matthew and Mark". Mark and Matthew: The text says "they were fishermen" fishermen are called to become fishers-of-men.

Why do they follow him, do you think?

What information did they have? What do you think "fishermen for people" would have meant to THEM?

Optional extra activity

Read Luke V: what is added to the story (

Look back at the questions: reflect on what they tell you about where you are: where might be the possibilities for transformation, growth into discipleship?

"Vocation" - for each of us - has to do with what God is doing with our efforts to answer these questions about who we are, what we do, what people, practices and prayers are important to us. Welcome to the journey!

Closing Prayer

Light a candle: In a darkened room, we gradually "discern" what is there by using the little light we have. We see by means of light, which means that light is always around us. But how often do we actually notice the light and how it is working? Usually we need the help of an artist or photographer to help us see the light. When we're in the dark about the meaning and purpose of our lives, the spiritual practice of "discernment" can help focus our attention on the light: the presence and action of God in our lives, using practices of prayer, stories from our faith tradition, and guiding questions.

Augustine: "O God, who are you, and who am I?"

Offer a prayer for the person you have been talking with tonight - silently or aloud.

Closing prayer:

(at night) *Be present, merciful God, and sustain us through the hours of this night, that we who are wearied with the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness.*

OR *"Heavenly Father and Mother, Friend and Lover of our souls. In you we live and move and have our being. We humbly pray you, so to guide and govern us by Your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our lives, we may not forget you, but remember that we are ever walking in your sight. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

(Handout)

**Profile, Purpose, Passion, People, Practice, Prayer:
Six Questions to Guide us in Shaping a Faithful Life.**

•The "PROFILE" Question: What do you "do?" How do you answer this question at a social gathering (how do you describe your professional or "public" identity)? A person exploring this question will be looking at the face presented to the world and how that connects with his/her own sense of identity. It is closely related to the second question --

•The "PURPOSE" Question: *What is your "real work," or, to put it another way: what do you most enjoy doing: what is it that, when you are doing it, makes you feel that you are most fully and truly "yourself?" Many young adults do not yet know the answer to this question, but the process of asking it, with a group that is listening carefully, can be of help in exploring one's deepest values and motivations as well as one's "gifts."*

•The PASSION Question: *In the world of work, community, relationships where you find yourself, what do you feel must change? Where in your daily life or work do you want to shake your fists and cry out in frustration, "SOMETHING must be done about _____?"*

The PEOPLE Question: Who are the People whose voices guide you in your spiritual life? Where do you hear the voice of God in your human relationships? What is missing in those relationships?

The PRACTICE Question: What activities or "practices" do you engage in to help you live a life that matches your deepest values about time, money, relationships, the needs of others? What seems to be missing or out of balance in your spiritual practice?

•The PRAYER Question: *How do you pray? Where in your daily life and work have you been most often or most clearly aware of the presence of God? How do you respond to this awareness?*

Guide for Facilitators: Session #I

One of my favorite prayers for the church turns up at several key places in the Book of Common Prayer, and tells us something about who we think we are as a Church, a gathered community of faith. The prayer goes:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. "

I think this is a prayer that speaks across denominations, to many aspects of the Christian life. It is about transformation, about “the Church,” the community of faithful people, as an agent of transformation, and about the people in the church – ourselves – as being called to transformation. Those who use the Book of Common Prayer will encounter this prayer in the Good Friday service, right after we have offered the “solemn collects”, praying for the whole world, in all its brokenness and suffering. The series of prayers culminates in this one, with its declaration of hope that “things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new.” It also appears in the service for the Great Vigil of Easter, right after we have re-told the whole history of salvation, and right before we baptize new Christians and renew our own baptismal covenant, in anticipation of the Easter feast. And it is offered at ordinations and other events around the mission and ministry of the Church.

At the heart of this prayer is a petition for ongoing discernment and revelation: Let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new. The prayer for the church reminds us that we are a part of something that God is doing. The heart of Christian faith is the belief that God works in and through human beings, bringing life out of death, and empowering us to do Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world.

I like to begin with this prayer whenever I introduce a group to the practice of “discernment” in Christian community. It offers a “big picture” approach to the search for meaning and purpose in our lives. We are asking “what am I here for? What should I be doing with my life? What is unique about me? What do I have to offer? But we are always asking these questions in the context of a shared story and a vision of wholeness and reconciliation that the Scriptural tradition calls “the kingdom of God.”

Brian McLaren has suggested that in our own time, “kingdom of God” language doesn’t really speak because we don’t have kings and kingdoms. Even “reign” of God suggests a kind of authoritarian control that we chafe at (See his article [*Found in Translation*](#) . He writes: “The call to faith is the call to trust God and God’s dreams enough to realign our

dreams with God's, to dream our little dreams within God's big dream." (Online at <http://sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0603&article=060310>) This process, requiring imagination and prayerful openness, is also known in the Christian spiritual tradition as "discernment."

Discernment means, first of all, learning to see what it may be difficult to see without sustained, intentional attention – in a darkened room, we gradually "discern" what is there by using the little light we have. It is learning to see what is difficult to see. Or another way to look at it is this: We see by means of light, which means that light is always around us. But how often do we actually notice the light and how it is working – usually we need the help of an artist or photographer to help us see the light. The practice of discernment focuses our attention on the light: the presence and action of God in our lives, using the stories of the faith, Scripture, and practices of prayer.

Another way of understanding discernment is that it is about making choices, sorting out what is desirable and what is not. The tradition has understood this as a practice of prayer – listening for God's will in our lives. And that is ultimately the source of meaning and purpose in our lives.

Most of us have more of a sense of the Dream of God than we realize: We look around us and we see overwhelming brokenness, ugliness, suffering and injustice, and we say, "This is not the way it is supposed to be." *Seeing the brokenness* is a first step toward recognizing our call to be a part of God's work of transformation and reconciliation, a first step toward discerning our piece of that work.

"I am come that they might have life," Jesus says in gospel of John, and that they might have it abundantly." This is the life that we're invited to as Christians – we aren't going to get a total job description, but we're invited to practice discernment, to see what God is doing and to offer ourselves to that work, as who we are, and from where we are.

So the deep question we're asking, when we begin to think about the meaning and purpose of our lives and work, is really "What do I think God is trying to do in the part of the world, the culture, the family or community that I inhabit, and what is my piece of that work?"

This is a huge question and a deep one: How we participate in this? We begin where we are. First step is to look more closely at who we are and where we are in life, and what seems to be calling out to us in the world. The 6 Questions I've developed are an invitation to explore our lives, where we are, to begin to discern how God is at work with us, starting where we are right now, this minute.

As facilitator you may find it helpful to work through all six of these questions for yourself. Your own experience will be an important resource for you as you seek to mentor young adults through this process

II

Bible Study: God's Call in the "Now"

When we talk about "vocation" and "call" we often associate it with questions about the future: What should I do with my life? Grad school? A job? How will I make my living? What plans for the future will give meaning and purpose to my life? But when we look at the experience of "call" in Scripture – and especially in the gospels – it is not about the future. It's about right now. There are many stories of call throughout Scripture– I provide a list of them at the end of this exercise – but the thing to notice about the way Jesus calls his disciples in the gospels is that it's not about the future: it's about "now."

Spend some time in Bible study with the stories of the Call of the Fishermen. Begin with Mark 1: 16-19 and Matthew 4: 18-22, which are almost identical (Remember, the gospel of Mark is thought to be the earliest of the Gospels: dated around 60-70, so a generation after Jesus' death & resurrection. Mark emphasizes the importance of faith by portraying Jesus' disciples as failing to understand the truth about Jesus while they were with him. In Mark things happen quickly: "Immediately" is a frequent word throughout this gospel, and this story is about an immediate response to Jesus' call. The gospel of Matthew – the one that contains, for example, the Sermon on the Mount – is built on Mark and other sources, and emphasizes Jesus as the "new Moses," teaching and leading his people. Look first at this story as it is told in Mark. I'm quoting it here in the Revised Standard Version because there's something about the translation here that's closer to the original Greek than more recent, inclusive-language translations, and important for our purposes. Here it is:

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him."

"They were fishermen" and Jesus promises to make them "fishers of men." What does this mean (Or more emphatically, "What the hell does *that* mean? As the fictional disciple Biff asks his friend Joshua in Christopher Moore's novel *Lamb*. The same disciple, a few pages later, calls to some oarlock-makers and says, "follow him, and he'll make you oarlock-makers of men." – and then turns to Joshua/Jesus and says "see? It doesn't make sense")

So "fishers of men" – a phrase that has puzzled listeners to the English Bible for generations. But it's important for understanding how discipleship is presented and experienced in the gospels. The Greek in this passage reads, literally, first "they were fishermen" – that's their profession, part of who they were. Jesus'

call literally translates “Follow me” (Do as I do – model your lives after mine) and I will “*make you to become fishermen-for-men*”. His call is about a transformation – from what they were to something new. Though they leave their nets behind, there’s continuity between who they are in the now and who they’re being called to become. Notice, though, that they are not given a job description; they are not told what will happen in the future if they take this step. The invitation is simply “follow me.”

This is where we begin, in discerning God’s call to us. In the NOW:

Where are you right now? What are you doing?

Imagine how that call to transformation might translate into your life? How do you spend your days - in work? As a student? In other activities? How does following Jesus affect the way that you live out what you are doing right now? In your work, your family, your daily life, what does it mean to “follow Jesus?” To do what you’re doing, but in a new way that responds to his call.

This is why I believe it is valuable, in practicing discernment, to begin where we are, deepening our spiritual practice and paying attention to what difference the call of Jesus might make.

In this session or a future one (possibly the final session) -

Now turn to the story as told in the Gospel of Luke: Luke 5: 1-11. What is added here to the story as we find it in Mark and Matthew.

What challenges you about this story

What details do you notice?

What about the themes of “fear” and “abundance” in this story – what does it seem to say about the call of Jesus?

Finally, have a look at a different version of this story, after the Resurrection, in John 21: 1-19

They’re back to being fishermen again. What does this suggest about vocation? Look especially at the relationship between Peter and Jesus? What does this say to you about the call to follow Jesus?

For Ongoing Bible Study: Other stories in Scripture about the Call of God

Leaders may want to suggest that people work with one or more of these other passages from Scripture about call, either in group meetings or between sessions. The list is given with links for convenience.

Where do these stories speak to you, puzzle you, challenge you?
Talk about them in groups or with friends and companions.
How have you experienced a sense of “call” in your life?

Call of Abram: [Genesis 12: 1-3](#)

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2021:%201-19&version=ESV>

Moses & Burning Bush: [Exodus 3: 1-14](#)

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%203:%201-14&version=ESV>

Call of Samuel: [1 Samuel 3: 1-11](#)

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Samuel%203:%201-11&version=ESV>

Elijah [1Kings 19: 8-13](#)

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Kings%2019:%208-22&version=NIV>

Gideon: [Judges 6: 36-40](#)

[http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Judges 6:36-40&version=NIV](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Judges%206:36-40&version=NIV)

Call of Isaiah: [Isaiah 6: 1-8](#) (9-13)

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%206:1-8&version=NIV>

Call of Jeremiah: Jeremiah: [Jeremiah 1: 1-9 \(10-19\)](#)

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah%201:%201-19&version=NIV>

Annunciation to Mary: [Luke 1: 26-38](#)

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%201:26-38&version=NIV>

Call of the fishermen: [Matthew 4:18-21](#), [Mark 1:16-20](#);

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%204:18-22&version=NIV>

[Luke 5:1-11](#)(Simon Peter);

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%205:1-11&version=NIV>

[John 21: 1-19](#) (post resurrection call of Peter):

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2021:%201-19&version=NIV>

Jesus' call to John's disciples (Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael) [John 1: 35-51](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%201:%2035-51&version=NIV)
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%201:%2035-51&version=NIV>

Call of Matthew/Levi the tax collector: [Matt 9: 9\(10-13\)](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matt%209:9(10-13)&version=NIV); [Mark 2: 13-14 \(15-17\)](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%202:13-14(15-17)&version=NIV); [Luke 5: 27-28 \(29-32\)](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%205:27-28(29-32)&version=NIV) (followed by dinner and "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners, in all 3 synoptic gospels)
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%209:%209-13&version=NIV>
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%202:%2013-17&version=NIV>
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%205:27-32&version=NIV>

Sending of the 12: [Matthew 9:37-10:42](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%209:37-10:42&version=NIV) (all of chapter 10 is a sending)
Luke [9:1-6; 10-11](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%209:1-6;10:11&version=NIV) (all of Luke 9 relevant to discipleship)
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%209:37-10:42&version=NIV>
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%209:1-11&version=NIV>

Sending of the 70 ([Luke 10: 1-20](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%2010:1-20&version=NIV))
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%2010:1-20&version=NIV>

Call of Zacchaeus: [Luke 19: 1-10](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%2019:1-10&version=NIV)
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%2019:1-10&version=NIV>

The Risen Christ commissions Mary Magdalene: [John 20:9 \(1-16\)17-18](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2020:9(1-16)17-18&version=NIV)
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2020:1-18&version=NIV>

Jesus Commissions his disciples: [Matthew 28:16-20](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2028:16-20&version=NIV) , [Luke 24:36-53](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%2024:36-53&version=NIV)
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2028:16-20&version=NIV>;
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%2024:%2036-53&version=NIV>

Conversion of Paul and call to Ananias: [Acts 9: 1-19](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%209:1-19&version=NIV)
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%209:1-19&version=NIV>

Call of Philip, Conversion of Ethiopian [Acts 8: 26-40](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%208:26-40&version=NIV)
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%208:26-40&version=NIV>