



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for Vocation

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to examine how our primary vocation to enter God's Kingdom in faithful obedience transforms our jobs and education. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

- The Meaning of Vocation** 2
- To restore the original mystery and power of "vocation," it should be disengaged from some modern assumptions. We do not simply "choose" a course of action, but respond to a summons – which often is against our will and involves hardships. And the greatest danger is not this sort of resistance, but the possibility of being distracted from the goal.
- Called Through Relationship** 4
- The fullness of our calling is discovered in a way of life nourished by prayer, Sabbath-keeping, meditating on God's Word, fasting, hospitality, and spiritual direction. Christian vocation is about listening to and with others for the guidance of God's Spirit, about growing to understand our true need for communion with Christ's Body.
- Called Out, Not Left Out** 6
- The lawyer, homemaker, teacher, and business professional are called to glorify God through what they do day in and day out. So why do we exalt those who are called out as ministers or missionaries, but leave others feeling left out of God's vocational call?
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- The Dilbertization of Work** 12
- Many of us can identify with Dilbert's world, where work is meaningless and the corporate structure engenders laziness, frustration, and despair. Deeply unsatisfied with work, we hang on because we need the paycheck. How should we think about work when we're unhappy with our jobs?



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Focus Article:

📖 The Meaning of Vocation
(*Vocation*, pp. 11-19)

Suggested Article:

📖 Vocation Goes to the Movies
(*Vocation*, pp. 77-83)

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The Meaning of Vocation

To restore the original mystery and power of “vocation,” it must be disengaged from some modern assumptions. We do not simply “choose” a course of action, but respond to a summons – which often is against our will and involves hardships. And the greatest danger is in being distracted from the goal.

Prayer

O God, we have identified ourselves too closely with our jobs and responsibilities, forgetting that we are much more in your sight. Restore to us our sense of place and purpose in your grand design, through obedience to your commands. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:9-14

Responsive Reading (Ephesians 2:1, 4-10)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

By grace you have been saved.

God raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Reflection

We often misunderstand “vocation,” or God’s call to human beings, in two very different ways. We may think only ministers receive a call from God; or, in reaction to this, we may recognize that God calls everyone, but reduce their calling to merely a job or career. Neither view is adequate to the biblical concept of call.

God’s primary call – to enter the kingdom of God in faithful obedience – will transform our entire lives, including (though not limited to) our daily work. This biblical idea grates against our modern individualist self-image in several ways:

- ▶ *We do not simply “choose” our course of action, but respond to an external summons.* Our freedom, then, is not “an inner-directed impulse, but the use of the will to respond to an unforeseen and perhaps unknown reality,” Conyers writes.
- ▶ *Often a vocation is against our will.* God may call us to do something that we neither want to do nor are well prepared to do by ourselves. This contrasts to the modern advice to “think for ourselves” and “without the guidance of others,” to guide our lives by personal reasoned choices.
- ▶ *Our calling usually faces stiff resistance from others and hardships that must be overcome.* Conyers observes that it is surprising, then, that “from the point of view of answering to the summons,



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the greatest danger appears not in this kind of resistance, but in the possibility of being *diverted* or *distracted* from the goal."

- ▶ *We often must struggle to obey God's call*, especially "to get the self out of the way in responding to a call," Baumgaertner writes. Our response "is not a duty or a sacrifice or a conscious effort to reflect the glory of God" in our work, but is a kind of surrender in "response to the forgiveness of sins. The focus is not on the resultant actions of the individual to the call but on the individual's condition before the call—a condition which requires the forgiveness of sins."

A rich image of the meaning of vocation, Conyers concludes, is Jesus' raising of Lazarus. "Vocation, *vocatio*, is about being raised from the dead, made alive to the reality that we do not merely exist, but we are 'called forth' to a divine purpose."

Study Questions

1. When, according to Conyers (pp. 11-12), did the religious and secular misunderstandings of Christian vocation—as a call only for clergy; or, as a call for everyone, but only to a job or career—arise in church history? How is each mistake "partly right" about the meaning of vocation?
2. Read about the calls of Abram (Genesis 12), Moses (Exodus 3:1-4:18), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-9), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-10; 37:16-38:13), and Paul (Acts 7:54-8:3; 9:1-26). Which features of vocation—receiving a summons that is against one's will, facing hardships, or struggling to surrender and accept forgiveness—are prominent in each biblical story?
3. Has God called you to a specific task? Did the experience share some of the features of vocation highlighted in this study?
4. View a movie Baumgaertner discusses: *The Apostle*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Wise Blood*, or *The Mission*. What do you learn from the film about the nature of vocation?
5. Though we do not freely "choose" our Christian vocation, Baumgaertner insists that "vocation offers not the security of a known and familiar routine. It offers, instead, forgiveness hand-in-hand with a most *radical freedom*" (p. 83). In what sense are we radically free in our vocation?

Departing Hymn: "Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life"

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
such a way as gives us breath;
such a truth as ends all strife,
such a life as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:
such a light as shows a feast,
such a feast as mends in length,
such a strength as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
such a joy as none can move,
such a love as none can part,
such a heart as joys in love.

George Herbert (1593-1632)
Suggested Tune: THE CALL



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Focus Article:

📖 Called Through Relationship
(*Vocation*, pp. 20-28)

Suggested Article:

📖 Not the Righteous, But Sinners
(*Vocation*, pp. 44-46)

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Called Through Relationship

The fullness of our calling is discovered in a way of life nourished by Christian practices. Our vocation is about listening to and with others for the guidance of God's Spirit, about growing to understand our true need for communion with Christ's Body.

Prayer

O God, so often we have insisted upon our own way out of fear and insecurity. Teach us to listen to others and to your Spirit as we go about our duties. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 2:9-10

Responsive Reading (Ephesians 4:1b-8)

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit,

... just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."

Reflection

Rather than something we choose or decide, our vocation—like our unique creation—is an incredible gift from God. In calling us, God has graced us "according to the measure of Christ's gift," (Ephesians 4:7) and not, as we would expect, by the measure of *our* gifts. And Christ's gift cannot be measured, Paul writes, for we are "blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing" and share in "the riches of [God's] glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the *immeasurable* greatness of his power for us who believe" (1:3; 18-19).

"The abundance of God's grace available to us in Christ is inexhaustible and endlessly generative," Newman observes. "If we root our understanding of vocation in God's own abundance, then we see what a mistake it is to think about vocation simply as finding our talents and figuring out what to do with them. Rather and more fully, it is discovering and living out of the infinite and gratuitous abundance of God."

God calls us to be members of "one body and one Spirit" (4:4). This suggests "our primary calling is to *be* a people who live in communion with our triune God," Newman writes. "Only in community with God and others do we begin to discover, occasionally like a flash of lightning, but more often haltingly and by fits and starts, what we are called to *do* in our lives." These practices prepare us to listen with others in this faithful community for the guidance of God's Spirit:

- ▶ *hospitality*, the practice of welcoming other persons—even a stranger—into our lives, shapes us and our guests to be open to



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the surprising ways God works in the world. "It enables us to resist the idea that the way things are is the way they have to be, or that our futures are easily controlled."

- ▶ *meditating on God's word* and *spiritual direction* form us to receive guidance from others. These practices help us resist the "assumption that we discover our identity and vocation by breaking free from the past and pursuing a solitary quest to 'find ourselves,' rather than in and through communion."
- ▶ *fasting* and *feasting* in the Church year provide a rhythm of penitence and rejoicing that sustains us over the long haul. We remember that "our hope does not lie in human effort or potential, but in the reality of God's presence and promises."
- ▶ *Sabbath-keeping*, the practice of resting from work and depending on God, tells us that *what we do* in our daily work does not ultimately define *who we are*.
- ▶ *prayer*, which is a rich waiting before God, trains us "to be patient with ourselves, others, and even God.... [and] to trust that God will provide what we need, both as a people and as individuals, to live lives of faithfulness to God."

Study Questions

1. Of the Christian practices in this study, which are most significant in your discipleship, and which are neglected? Does your congregation encourage you in each practice?
2. How is each of these Christian practices countercultural?
3. "Our calling both *comes through* community and *is oriented toward* community," Newman says (p. 23). What are the dangers of letting a community guide our decision making? Which community, according to Newman, should we trust?
4. Which of the Christian practices in this study are suggested by the hymn "Be Thou My Vision"? Which ones are missing?
5. Read about Jesus' call of Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13). What themes in this story does Caravaggio highlight in his painting, *Calling of St. Matthew* (pp. 44-46).

Departing Hymn: "Be Thou My Vision" (verses 1, 2, and 5)

Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art;
thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my Wisdom, and thou my true Word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
thou and thou only, first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my Treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, my victory won,
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.

Irish hymn (8th century)

Tune: SLANE



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Focus Articles:

- 📖 Called Out, Not Left Out
(*Vocation*, pp. 61-64)
- 📖 Our Daily Work
(*Vocation*, pp. 65-68)

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Called Out, Not Left Out

Christ calls all who are made in God's image to become co-laborers with God in the redemption of the whole creation. Each of us will spend most of our waking hours for the rest of our lives doing our jobs. This is a stunning fact which tells us that if Jesus Christ is not Lord of our work life, he is Lord of very little.

Prayer

O God, in the life of your son, Jesus, and countless followers throughout the ages, we see that your call to love and serve others can be lived out through virtually any task, if we are spirit-led and kingdom-focused.

Teach us to hear that still small voice that knows us better than we know ourselves, prompting us to be whom you created us to be and to use the gifts you have given us to use.

Thank you, Lord, that you are as close to us as we will allow you to be, redeeming all our work for your higher purposes. Amen.

Scripture Readings: Genesis 41:33-42; Judges 4:1-8; Daniel 1:3-5, 2:48

Reflection

Our culture often presents work as "either a drudgery or a deity," Howard E. Butt, Jr. remarks, but "either way it's a dead-end." Over against such workplace pessimism or punch-card idolatry, the gospel can take up our work into a sacred calling.

We grant that church-based occupations – pastor, evangelist, program minister, administrator, and missionary – can be valid responses to God's call, but forget that lay people (who comprise ninety-nine percent of all faithful disciples) also are called to serve God through their occupations in the world. When we exalt ministers and missionaries but ignore the call of the laity, we deny them a sense of sacred purpose as they build ministries in their daily work. Rather than "called out," lay persons may feel "left out."

Restoring an awareness of the high calling of our daily work won't be easy. We must:

- ▶ *realize that God is not principally interested in religious things.* Scripture states that "all things have been created through Christ and for Christ...and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16-17). It does not say "all *religious things*," or "all *church-related things*," but "*all things*." Jesus Christ is Lord over all life and we diminish who Christ is when we consign him to Sunday school and worship services.

We do well to recall Bezalel, who was chosen by God and filled by the Spirit with "wisdom, intelligence, and skill in all kinds of crafts" (Exodus 31:1-5). He was an artist, a designer, a master craftsman, and a top-notch executive for the glory of God. Furthermore, in Jesus, as Butt reminds us, "the Almighty God, who created us all, became a human being and did ordinary, secular, hands-on work just like you and me."

- ▶ *align our vocational lives with Christ's purposes for the world.* Our various occupations matter to God. The Bible is full of examples: Deborah as the judicial leader of Israel, Joseph as prime minister of Egypt, Daniel as second-in-command of Babylon, and the



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apostle Paul as itinerant tentmaker. It takes all sorts of people to accomplish God's work in the world; it takes the varied members of the body of Christ.

When our occupational lives are taken up into the work of Christ, we can be confident that our labor will not be in vain. When the kingdom of God does come in completion, Christ's perfect work will make whole and complete all the work that we have begun.

▶ *not conform to reigning definitions of our vocations.* The workplace does not have the last word on how we go about our jobs. Wherever we are and whatever we do, we must be "ambassadors for Christ." This might mean doing our jobs differently than our colleagues. Like give examples: "A Christian lawyer like Gary Haugen founds International Justice Mission to help free Thai girls from brothels and Indian children from sweatshops; a Christian poet like Wendell Berry puts forth a vision of what it is to be authentically human; a Christian physicist like Nobel-laureate William Phillips is awestruck and grateful as a scientist as he explores the depths of creation; a Christian businessman like Millard Fuller uses his entrepreneurial abilities to start Habitat for Humanity; and a Christian pediatrician like Rev. Gloria White-Hammond brings healing in Jesus' name to the urban core of Boston."

"We are not called to fit into our profession; we are called to 'turn the world upside down' for Jesus' sake," he continues. "We are called to be co-conspirators with Jesus against the principalities and powers. God wants to use our passion, skill, and creativity to move the world toward that day when 'the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.'"

Our challenge is to relate God's call to everyday work and to transform our workplaces so that they manifest our vocation. Then, as we work in the many ways we do, we will be working to build the kingdom of God.

Study Questions

1. Do you see evidence that Christian vocation is often thought to involve only *religious* or *church-related* work? What can your congregation do about this trend?
2. Aligning our occupational lives with Christ's purposes for the world is a noble goal, but it can be difficult to realize. How would you describe the contribution of your job to God's kingdom? Are some careers particularly difficult or impossible to engage in as "ambassadors for Christ"?
3. Kyle Matthews' new hymn, "Voice That Calls Us Each by Name," recalls that God has summoned us "to visions of your kingdom come and gifts that we have yet to claim." In what sense does God call us "each by name"? How do we discover and take up these "gifts that we have yet to claim"?

Departing Hymn: "Voice That Calls Us Each by Name"



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Focus Article:

📖 Investing in the Divine Economy
(*Vocation*, pp. 29-35)

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Investing in the Divine Economy

God created us to serve and be served by each other in the world of work. When we find our place in this interconnected system of mutual support, we participate in God's way of caring for the human community. We invest ourselves in the divine economy.

Prayer

Giver of every good and perfect gift, we, who consume more than we need and own more than we can use, come before you now to confront the truth that our deepest need is not met by possessing things, but by being a part of something bigger than our selves and beyond the reach of our control.

Allow us to employ our gifts in your kingdom—making the crooked straight, the blind to see, the lame to walk, the lost found, and the dead alive again. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 4:10-11

Reflection

Our primary calling in the New Testament is not to particular social roles, jobs, or careers, but to a new way of life, which is described as following Christ (1 Peter 2:21), having fellowship with Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9), leaving darkness and entering the light (1 Peter 2:9), becoming holy (1 Peter 1:15), and being a saint (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2). So what does this have to do with our work?

"The concept of work as vocation comes to the fore when we ask ourselves how we propose to follow Christ," Hardy suggests. "Here the concept of vocation picks up on the New Testament image of the church as a body: all are called to follow Christ, the head of the church, but each one has a special role to play in the body on the basis of a unique gift. *The concept of work as vocation in effect says that the same principle holds for society at large.* Like all Christians, I am called to love my neighbor. But I respond to that call on the basis of my particular set of abilities and passions—as a builder of houses, auto-maker, school counselor, youth minister, or dental hygienist."

Hardy uses the notion of "divine economy" to capture how God has created us to be interdependent persons who serve and are served by each other: "We are born ignorant, but there are parents and teachers; we are born naked, but there are those who design, manufacture, and distribute clothing; we are born hungry, but there are those who produce, distribute, and prepare food." Our work becomes a part of our Christian vocation when we find a place of service within this system of mutual support and enter into God's way of caring for the human community.

The great German reformer, Martin Luther, believed God calls all Christians through their social roles, or stations. "Our calling is mediated by the duties that attach to our stations in life," Hardy summarizes Luther's view. "To discover our calling, we need only remind ourselves of who we are." Later reformers, like John Calvin and his followers, realized that human institutions could be unstable and corrupted by human sin. For instance, "the duties and expectations attached to the social role of father in some societies can be dangerous and damaging. So can the duties and expectations that impinge upon those who currently practice family law." This refor-



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mation legacy suggests two guidelines for investing ourselves in the divine economy:

- ▶ *Specific gifts are indicators of what God would have us do with our lives.* Our gifts include not only talents and abilities, but also concerns and interests. "Discovering our gifts is not a matter of simple introspection or private self-estimation. We find out what we are good at by reflecting on the loop of our life experiences and the feedback we receive from others," Hardy notes. "It is important to listen humbly to others – they often have a better and more sober view of ourselves than we do."
- ▶ *God calls us to serve others.* Though we are tempted "to evaluate a job solely on the basis of salary, security, status, and satisfaction," he observes, "as Christians, we are obliged to evaluate a job on the basis of its social content – the way in which it benefits, or harms, others. Because of the effects of sin on the institutional shape of work in our society, we cannot assume that all existing occupations are equally helpful, or that the highest paying jobs are the ones that fill the greatest and most important needs. To catch hold of our calling, we need not only a sober estimation of ourselves, but a critical understanding of our society."

Study Questions

1. How does your current work, occupation, or career measure up to the first guideline: are you discovering and employing the specific gifts that God has given you?
2. How does your current work, occupation, or career measure up to the second guideline: what is the social content of your work – the ways in which it benefits, or harms, others?
3. To what extent should Christians evaluate a job offer on the basis of salary, security, status, and satisfaction?
4. "Of course, my job is only one of the places I respond to my calling," Hardy observes. "I also respond as a citizen of a democratic country, as a neighbor in my corner of town, and as a member of a local community of faith. Human life is multi-faceted. And so will be our response to God's call" (p. 35). In what relationships and roles, in addition to your employment, do you invest in the divine economy?
5. Comment on Dorothy Sayers' observation that "A right kind of work must be related, not only to the needs of (people), but also a willingness to love and serve the material body of God's universe" (in "Other Voices," *Vocation*, p. 59).
6. The Calvinist view opens the possibility of a broader social critique of our roles; not only our personal jobs and relationships, but entire forms of occupation and social roles can be reformed according to God's will. How might your current occupation and social roles need to be reformed in light of the divine economy?

Departing Hymn: "Voice That Calls Us Each by Name"



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Focus Article:

📖 Following Our Vocation
in Organizations
(*Vocation*, pp. 36-43)

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Following Our Vocation in Organizations

Organizations can enable us to be of generous service to others. Yet they may sap our spirit with patterns of work that go against our divine vocation. So, we should approach our participation in them with not only a caring spirit but also a discerning heart.

Prayer

O God, we seek the purpose and fulfillment of discovering and using the gifts you have given us.

We confess our dependence upon you to show us who we truly are and what we are uniquely suited to do.

Lead us to make our work an expression of the ministry you have given us to serve, liberate, and redeem those you love, that we might truly be your disciples. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

Reflection

How will our work contribute to the kingdom of God in the end? Despite our limited, time-bound perspectives, we long to see the entire picture. Novelist Mitch Albom depicts our dream in *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* – the tale of old Eddie, an aging war veteran who is trapped in the dead-end job of fixing broken rides at an amusement park. When he dies, his life's work is explained to him by five people who were in it. We yearn for the grace Eddie receives – it would be heaven!

We must toil without knowing the full significance of our work, says the Teacher in Ecclesiastes. Yet we can discover more limited meaning in our career, which will be enough for our pleasure in it. Further, we can be assured that all our labor matters to God, who “seeks out what has gone by” (3:13-14).

We do much of our work within organizations, including schools, congregations, corporations, volunteer agencies, and communities. These may “give meaning to our lives by leveraging our talents and abilities in partnership with others to achieve social goals that matter to us,” Smith observes. Or, they can be oppressive constraints that derail us from discovering and living our call more fully. To negotiate the interplay between our personal vocation and the corporate vocations of the organizations around us, we will need these critical skills:

- ▶ *discovering an organization's “charism,” or its mission and defining values.* This is not as simple as reading the published vision statement, Smith says. “Often we must ‘read between the lines’ by listening closely to co-workers, carefully observing their day-to-day activities, and comparing and evaluating their dreams for the organization.” Our contribution to an organization – and, through it, to God's kingdom – very much depends on a happy fit between the corporate mission and what God has called us to do.
- ▶ *gaining a gracious differentiation from an organization.* Though we are committed to a community and sacrificially support its



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mission, we maintain a sense of our own calling and do not wholly identify ourselves with the organization. This helps us “know when to stay in a difficult situation, striving to inspire change and growth in the organization’s vision, and when to leave.”

- ▶ *maintaining a kingdom perspective on institutions.* Good work may not be in large or prominent organizations. “God will often call his people into work that is seemingly obscure and marginal,” Smith says. “We will be wise therefore to consider small business, rural churches, or low-keyed operations as fitting avenues of service, for what God is doing through such organizations may have an impact over the course of many years or even generations.” And our work may be “behind the scenes” rather than public. “Whether it be the quality control that workers implement in manufacturing, concentration that preachers put into sermon preparation, or attention that nurses bring to the smallest details of care-giving, each of us really must approach our work with a care for excellence that is not ultimately directed to what our employer thinks is excellent. In the end, we are accountable to God for the quality of our work.”

Study Questions

1. Describe the *charisms* (mission and defining values) of the organizations in which you serve, including your congregation. How have these enriched your personal call?
2. “Ideally in an organization our gifts are affirmed and recognized, and we have an opportunity to use and enhance our skills in partnership with others toward a common mission,” Smith writes (*Vocation*, p. 41). If this is not the case, however, because of a lack of fit between our personal call and an organization’s *charism*, what should we do?
3. What is most difficult for you about maintaining the kingdom perspective that Smith describes?
4. How, according to Smith, is our stage of adult life—young, middle, or senior adulthood—a primary factor in the way we relate to organizations?

Departing Hymn: “May the Mind of Christ, My Savior” (verses 1, 2, and 3)

May the mind of Christ, my Savior,
live in me from day to day,
by His love and power controlling
all I do and say.

May the Word of God dwell richly
in my heart from hour to hour,
so that all may see I triumph
only through His power.

May the peace of God my Father
rule my life in everything,
That I may be calm to comfort
sick and sorrowing.

Kate B. Wilkinson (1913)

Suggested Tune: ST. LEONARDS



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Dilbertization of Work
(*Vocation*, pp. 69-76)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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The Dilbertization of Work

Many of us can identify with Dilbert's world, where work is meaningless and the corporate structure engenders laziness, frustration, and despair. Deeply unsatisfied with work, we hang on because we need the paycheck. How should we think about work when we're unhappy with our jobs?

Prayer

O God, we are not all the same with regard to our work. Some of us have work that is demeaning or ill-suited to our gifts.

Help us to endure while we must and to see every opportunity to serve others as an opportunity to serve you. Lead us to new possibilities.

Some of us have work that we take for granted.

Forgive our idleness and teach us discipline. Make us stewards of our opportunities and challenge us to invest ourselves more fully. Lead us to become productive members of our communities and witnesses to your own excellence.

Some of us have fulfilling or rewarding work.

Teach us gratitude, reminding us that to whom much is given, much is required. Lead us to opportunities for ministry within our work and inspire us to provide opportunities for others. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Ecclesiastes 5:10-20

Reflection

What do we want out of a job? Information-technology workers, part of the "creative class" studied by Richard Florida, named challenge, flexibility, and stability as the most significant of thirty-eight marks of job satisfaction. Money ranked fourth. "This suggests that today's workers don't see their job as 'just a job' or paycheck," Hsu observes. "Whether they realize it or not, people are looking for a job fit that matches an intrinsic, God-given sense of calling or vocation in which they experience challenge, significance, and the satisfaction of meaningful work."

When workers "find enjoyment in their toil," the Teacher in Ecclesiastes concludes, "this is a gift of God. For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts" (5:19b-20).

What should we do if we are trapped in a Dilbert-like job—performing tasks that aren't meaningful, among unmotivated coworkers, with an employer that doesn't care—where frustration replaces the joy of God's gift of good employment?

- ▶ *Discover who we are.* Some jobs fit us while others don't. What are we interested in, what motivates us, how do we work best, and what do we want to do? "Self-knowledge leads to discernment and optimal work fit," Hsu writes. "People with the same spiritual gifts might have very different vocations because of different passions, personalities, or experiences."
- ▶ *Look past success to significance.* Hsu has held five different jobs in the last decade, but with the same employer. "Rather than changing companies in search of more lucrative opportunities, it was



Christian Reflection

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more important that I work for a company that I believe in," he says. "It does not matter so much what I do as who I work for." Others may retire early and begin a new type of work. Business-people may enter full-time Christian ministry. On the other hand, Paul Stevens quit a pastorate that isolated him from realities of the marketplace and became a carpenter. He enjoys the physical work and interaction with non-church members.

- ▶ *Follow our calling with courage.* If we hate our jobs, God may counsel forbearance and perseverance; perhaps we are in this job for a reason. But if we suffer "chronic Dilbert-feelings," God may be calling us to change ourselves (our attitudes or skills) to fit the job, find a new employer, or change our job or career. None of these are easy and all require courage.

Study Questions

1. Are you a *Dilbert* fan? Do you recall a favorite *Dilbert* strip?
2. "All of us need to discern where we feel God's pleasure," Hsu suggests, or the job that makes us say "This is what God put me on the planet for. This is what I'm wired to do!" Have you been blessed with this experience?
3. How can your congregation help its members find the joy of God's gift of good employment?
4. Comment on Douglas Meeks' observation: "Released from work as frenetic self-assertion, the justified person can enter into Work as free service of God's grace" (quoted in "Other Voices," *Vocation*, p. 59).

Departing Hymn: "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" (verses 1, 4, 6, and 7)

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is your health and salvation!
Come all who hear, now to his temple draw near;
praise him in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who will prosper your work and defend
you;
surely his goodness and mercy shall daily attend you.
Ponder anew what the Almighty can do,
if with his love he befriends you.

Praise to the Lord, who, when darkness of sin is abounding,
who, when the godless do triumph, all virtue confounding,
then sheds his light, chases the horrors of night,
saints with his mercy surrounding.

Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore him!
All that has life and breath, come now with praises before
him.
Let the Amen sound from his people again;
gladly forever adore him.

Joachim Neander (1680); tr. Catherine Winkworth (1863), alt.
Suggested Tune: LOBE DEN HERREN

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

The Meaning of Vocation

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	John 9:1-41
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss John 9:1-41
Questions 1, 2, or 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the biblical idea of vocation, or call of God for human beings.
2. To explore some differences between this biblical idea and the common meanings of “vocation” today.
3. To discuss the way some contemporary films “get it right” about the nature of vocation.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Vocation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. Locate the tune, THE CALL, for “Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life” in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

“In *Bird by Bird* Anne Lamott tells the story of a young child whose blood is a perfect match for his sister, who needs a blood transfusion to save her life. He is asked by his parents if he is willing to give his blood to her, and his response is to ask if he can think it over. The next day he announces to his parents that he has decided that yes, he is willing to donate his blood to his sister, so later he is put on a gurney next to his sister and his blood travels through an IV straight into his sister’s arm. After a little while the boy asks, ‘How soon until I start to die?’⁶

... This child was conscious in a way most of us are not. This child was aware of consequences. He was fully prepared to go the whole way – to give not just a little, but his entire self, to lay down his life for his sister – and he had to think about it only overnight. A child who has not yet reached the age of accountability provides an example of the purest response. He was given permission to give himself, and what he did was something he had never done before, even though, of course, it had been done before, in cosmic terms, on the cross” (*Vocation*, pp. 82-83).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 1:9-14 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Ask members to define “vocation.” What are the common meanings today? (Perhaps they will say “a job or career that individuals choose after considering their interests and abilities.”) The scripture and responsive readings highlight the Apostle Paul’s understanding of vocation: God’s call is to everyone, and it begins with a rescue from spiritual darkness and forgiveness of sins. The credit goes to God: “we are what he has made us.” Use the four ways this biblical idea grates against the modern individualist self-image, to contrast the biblical meaning of vocation with the contemporary definitions that members mentioned.

Encourage members to further examine the four characteristics of the biblical view in light of some biblical stories of vocation and their personal experiences of call.

If you decide to extend the discussion to a second session, members might view one or more of the movies discussed in Baumgaertner's article.

Study Questions

1. The *religious misunderstanding* arose with the creation of monastic orders (in the third to sixth centuries) to combat the church's increasing accommodation to the surrounding culture. Conyers admires monasticism's sharp criticism of secular institutions: not every line of work can be "done for the Lord." The *secular misunderstanding* followed upon the Protestant Reformation, when Luther and Calvin rightly stressed that everyone could serve God through their good work. Unfortunately, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted, the Protestant view could limit vocation to a job and be used to justify all secular institutions uncritically.
2. Use the suggested passages to focus discussion, but encourage members to recall other pertinent events in the lives of these biblical figures. Abram faces hardships of travel, famine, confrontation with Egyptians, and quarrels with Lot over their limited resources. Prominent in the call of Moses is his fear and resistance to God's call; he lacks ability to confront Pharaoh and lead the people; he anticipates (and will face) many hardships. Isaiah is not only concerned to deal with the difficulties of God's call, but is very aware of his sinfulness. Jeremiah resists the calling for which he is unprepared; furthermore, he properly fears for his life—he will be abandoned by the King and almost killed by leaders who despise his prophecy. Paul's sinfulness is prominent in the account of his call; he endures the enmity of his former friends and the legitimate suspicions of his new brothers and sisters in Christ; he will face many hardships throughout his vocation.
3. Encourage members to share their personal experiences. Which elements of the biblical view—receiving a summons that was against their will, facing hardships, or struggling to surrender and accept forgiveness—are prominent in these experiences? Sometimes other people can help us to describe and better understand our experiences.
4. Baumgaertner sums up each movie in "Vocation Goes to the Movies" (pp. 77-83). "Sonny" Dewey (*The Apostle*) struggles with his own sinful anger; often he is tempted away from his calling. Sister Helen Prejean (*Dead Man Walking*) resists her vocation to minister to a death row prisoner; she faces resistance from a victim's family, and struggles with her sense of inadequacy. In his prideful self-image, Hazel Motes (*Wise Blood*) resists his vocation (in exaggerated, larger-than-life ways); only when he is a broken person seeking forgiveness, does he fulfill his calling. Father Gabriel (*The Mission*) overcomes many hardships; Mendoza struggles with his anger after he accepts a vocation against his will. Baumgaertner is least satisfied with *The Mission* because she thinks the characters are not complex enough.
5. The radical freedom is not to "choose" our vocation, but to respond to God's call with forms of ministry that employ the full range of our resourcefulness. Often God does not lay out the details of our ministry, but invites us to share in his creative redemption of the world. Ironically, we are most free when we respond in obedience. Members might describe how they or someone they know has experienced such freedom when they are confident that they are following God's call.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Called Through Relationship

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To recognize that our primary vocation is a gift from God that comes through and is oriented toward the community of faith.
2. To understand how Christian practices prepare us to listen with others for the guidance of God in our lives.
3. To consider why the church that extends beyond our denomination and this present era is the faith community to guide our decision making.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Vocation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the hymn “Be Thou My Vision,” locate the tune, SLANE, in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

“The story of Moses’ call to confront Pharaoh reminds us that calling may not match up with our talents.... Moses tells God, ‘I have no talent for getting up in front of people and talking!’ Though God promises, ‘I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak,’ Moses still objects, ‘Oh, my Lord, please send someone else’ (4:13). God grows angry, but nonetheless allows Moses the freedom to resist. In the end, they reach a solution: God sends Aaron to be Moses’ spokesman. But Moses, we might notice, is not off the hook; he accepts God’s call to lead the people of Israel, despite his own perception that he does not have the necessary talent to do this....

“Listening for God’s call begins with seeing our lives as gifts. Like Moses, most of us cannot initially do this. At first Moses finds his calling to be as terrifying as the burning bush and even more intimidating in its demands, yet at the *end* of his life, he can say of God, ‘The Rock, his work is perfect; and all his ways are just’ (Deuteronomy 32:4). As Moses looks out over the land that the Lord has sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he recognizes that the promises of the Lord are being fulfilled in his own life and in the world. He ends his days singing not about his own talents, but about a God who is ever faithful, even when God’s own people are not” (*Vocation*, pp. 21-22).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Peter 2:9-10 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This lesson makes two related points: (1) God's call comes through and is oriented toward the community which is the church, and (2) to faithfully attend to our vocation, it is more important how we live together as Christians rather than what we individually *think*.

The scripture reading from 1 Peter 2:9-10 stresses the corporate nature of God's call. The title "chosen race" emphasizes that we respond to a summons; "royal priesthood" stresses that we are a body of disciples, members together of "a royal house" that serves God; by God's grace we have been made into "a people." Ephesians 4:4 puts it this way: our gifts are received in and employed in service of the "one body and one Spirit."

"We cannot simply *think* our way into living out our calling more fully," Newman writes. "Rather, the fullness of our calling is discovered in a way of life sustained and nourished by Christian practices such as prayer, Sabbath-keeping, meditating on God's Word, fasting, hospitality, and spiritual direction." These activities sustain the Christian way of life and "strengthen us to resist ways of thinking and living that would diminish our sense of vocation" (p. 24). Use the explanations and quotations in Newman's article to help members consider how each practice forms us to listen with others for God's guidance.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to discuss each practice in relation to the congregations in which they have been members. Though they may stress varying practices, congregations usually employ some form of all seven of these activities.
2. Our culture stresses that as *individuals* we *choose* our vocation. Members may discuss how each practice puts the emphasis on *receiving* our vocation as God's gift (or, on *waiting* on God), and on *relying on the church community* for guidance in listening for God's call.
Our culture encourages us to use our gifts to advance our individual goals, but these Christian practices shape us to love God and to serve others.
3. Newman discusses the example of St. Francis, whose family opposed his calling to poverty and ministry. "Christians believe that the community called 'church' takes precedence over our natural family (see, for example, Mark 3:32-35)." Members may be familiar with individual congregations that, like some human families, are abusive, dictatorial, or spiritually blind. She stresses that the church is not only "a particular local congregation, but also the whole communion of saints, those who have gone before us and those outside the walls of our particular denomination." Francis discovered his calling "through the Body of Christ, broadly understood: he absorbed in a new and creative way the gospel that he had been given by those who lived before him" (p. 24).
4. The hymn suggests *meditating on God's word* and *prayer*, allowing God to guide the way we see and think about the world. Members may note that the communal aspects of discerning God's call, as in the practices of *spiritual direction* and *Sabbath-keeping*, are not mentioned directly (though the hymn, of course, is a form of spiritual direction for the one who reads or sings it). The hymn stresses how following God shapes the individual, but neglects to mention how this formation occurs through communal practices.
5. Caravaggio stresses that Matthew is a sinner who is unworthy of and unprepared for God's call. Jesus surprises Matthew during his wanton leisure in a tavern, not in his place of work. By depicting Matthew and his friends in contemporary garb, the artist helps his viewers identify with them. Notice the prominence of Peter, who represents the other disciples and the church. Members should reflect on Gerhard Lohfink's observation that Jesus' disciples "were not made the center of Israel because they were holier or more perfect than the others; they were not a bit better than anyone else. The issue was never them as special individuals, but always and only the whole people of God, to whom they were sent" (quoted on p. 23).

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Called Out, Not Left Out

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how lay occupations, as well as *religious* jobs, can be responses to God’s calling.
2. To explore how our particular jobs and careers can participate in Christ’s purposes for the world.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Vocation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Comment

Share Abraham Kuyper’s comments about the rule of God, which begins: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’...” (*Vocation*, p. 62).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Genesis 41:33-42, Judges 4:1-8, and Daniel 1:3-5; 2:48 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Our culture sends mixed messages about everyday work. Sometimes we are told it is merely a drudgery to be endured; other times work is presented as the most important area of our lives. The first message suggests that work is so bad and lowly that we should be content in our work-a-day cynicism rather than long for better days; the latter understanding encourages slavery to the “company store.” Encourage members to give examples of each message – from advertising, movies, television programs, or popular books. Perhaps they have heard each message from the pulpit! “Either way it’s a dead-end,” observes Howard E. Butt, Jr. “Over against that dismal workplace pessimism,” and workplace idolatry, “stands the gospel. The gospel by which work becomes sacred calling” (*Vocation*, p. 66).

In what way does the gospel turn our work “into sacred calling”? This certainly does not mean our jobs must be religious. Indeed, if the gospel limited occupations to religious work, then the majority of us would be “left out” rather than “called out.” The gospel disciplines all occupations and guides them toward obeying the primary gospel call – to participate in Christ’s purposes for the world. Our work is taken up into the good goals of God when faithfulness to Christ is the primary defining characteristic of our labor. The surrounding culture and workplaces do not define what is appropriate; Christian vocation is defined by Christ alone.

Study Questions

1. Members may mention how ministers, missionaries, and other church employees are honored in worship services or Christian publications, while the labor of teachers, business people, farmers, government employees, politicians, and those who care for children or do household work, or other occupations is rarely acknowledged as a faithful response to God's call. The work of deacons or other church leaders may be honored.

Encourage members to discuss how Christian vocation is understood in relation to occupations. For whom does the congregation have "commissioning" services? Who is invited to give a testimony about how God has been at work through their job? The goal of this discussion is to relate Christian vocation to the work of all faithful disciples, not to criticize the good work done by ministers, missionaries, and others in religious occupations. Focus the conversation by selecting one or two lay occupations (teacher, businessperson, farmer, or housekeeper) and brainstorming various ways that the congregation might encourage and support those workers throughout the church year.

2. Our struggle to live out our Christian vocation through daily work is captured by Jesus' prayer that his disciples live "in the world" but not be "of the world" (John 17). Too often God's purpose for our work life is thwarted by the reigning necessities of our jobs; we find ourselves operating under the rules "of the world" rather than being ambassadors for Christ within the world. The biblical examples are profound at this point, especially Daniel who wields great power in Babylon, but risks the den of lions because of his refusal to let the empire set the rules for his obedience. In our time, some occupations seem to be more hostile to Christian convictions than others. The rules of banking, for instance, make profit the bottom line, while Christians in banking may attend more to compassion and even debt-forgiveness in some cases. Christian tradition has a long history of questioning military service for fear that national goals might trump obedience to Christ's kingdom. These are only two examples of how the Christian vocation can make our work-day lives a challenge. This challenge may be experienced in different ways by educators, politicians, lawyers, homemakers, or those in other occupations.

Encourage members to share their work experiences and how devotion to Christ's purposes for the world is made difficult or is overwhelmed in the workplace. Invite members to brainstorm solutions to these "tough cases."

3. Few of us have had a "Damascus road" experience like the Apostle Paul's in which we received God's call in a flash of light and moment of awe. Rather we have come to know the call of God in our lives in different and more humble ways: reading Scripture, praying, reflecting on our job experiences, being influenced by family members or friends, or receiving guidance from members in the local church. Because God calls each of us by name, he does so in many different and appropriate ways. But this call always involves the church, which is God's gospel messenger to the world; in it our giftedness as members of Christ's body are made known. In the church we learn to serve as we are enabled, not necessarily by our own abilities, but by the daily graces of the divine.

Members may tell how they were called to enter a particular career or form of service to others, or to take a particular job. How did they discover and develop their occupational gifts? If some members feel their gifts are undiscovered or unused in their daily work, encourage them to discuss this with the group. Others should commit to pray for those who have these uncertainties about their gifts. Some members may need encouragement and guidance in appreciating the value to God of their current labor; others may need assistance in finding opportunities for meaningful work.

Departing Hymn

"Voice That Calls Us Each by Name" is on pp. 47-49 of *Vocation*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Investing in the Divine Economy

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the call to employ our individual gifts in service to the body of Christ also applies to our work in the society at large.
2. To understand the “divine economy” as an interconnected system of mutual support through which we participate in God’s way of caring for the human community.
3. To examine whether our jobs, social roles, and careers lead us to discover and employ the specific gifts that God has given to us.
4. To evaluate the social content of our jobs, social roles, and careers – the ways in which they benefit, or harm, others.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Vocation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Discerning God’s call for our work and career requires “an ability to read the divine economy of human labor and to locate our place within it. If that economy is hidden to us, it’s probably because we tend to think of God as a distant deity, making only occasional appearances in a world that otherwise runs pretty much on its own,” Hardy notes. To remind us how God continually works in the world, Hardy tells this familiar story: “Once upon a time there was a pious man standing on his roof, surrounded by rising floodwaters...” (*Vocation*, p. 30).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read 1 Peter 4:10-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Describing our divine calling, 1 Peter 2:9 rejoices, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Our primary vocation, or calling, is to enter the kingdom of God in faithful obedience.

But what does this vocation imply for our personal and family relationships, our choice of jobs and careers, and our deliberate preparation for these through experience and education? In other words, what is the connection between this call to follow Christ and our *work*? (We are using “work” broadly to include volunteer service activities as well as business or professional employment, and caring for friends, family members, and others through institutions of care-giving. All of these relationships are part of the “divine economy,” the way God created us to serve and be served by others through an interconnected system of mutual support.)

1 Peter 4:10-11 relates vocation to our work when it instructs us to use God’s gifts in the service of others (in the faith community). Hardy suggests that the same principle – of discovering our gifts and employing them to benefit others – applies to society at large.

Study Questions

1. Discuss whether members have opportunities to explore their gifts (interests and concerns as well as abilities and talents) as they work. Do colleagues, family members, and friends regularly help them to evaluate what they have done well and how they do their best work? Encourage members to brainstorm on how they might develop and employ more of God's gifts in their work.
2. Some members may provide daily care to family members or friends; they may help care for others directly through volunteer opportunities or employment. Brainstorm how they benefit others *indirectly* through the products they manufacture, professional services they provide, charitable groups they support, and the wise investment of their money.
3. Salary, security, status, and satisfaction are legitimate concerns, of course, but they should not be the only, or the most important concerns for a Christian. We should avoid some jobs and workplaces regardless of their attractiveness by these measures, because they do not really benefit (and may harm) others. Encourage members to reflect on job offers and careers they have considered. How much salary and security should be enough? How important is status? Should some unsatisfying work be endured for the sake of the good it contributes in the divine economy?
4. In our families we may care for spouses, children and grandchildren, aging parents, or brothers and sisters. We may support and encourage our friends. In our communities we may care for others by volunteering in a professional association, sports club, or school group. At church we may serve others through teaching, leading in worship, singing in a choir, visiting hospitals, working on a clean-up crew, praying for others needs, or celebrating their growth. Our hobbies may benefit others, whether we share garden-fresh vegetables, make encouraging greeting cards, or help maintain a local hiking trail. Selecting financial investments, voting in elections, writing political representatives, and supporting worthy causes can be ways of serving others in the divine economy.
5. We should broaden the idea of "social content" to include how our work benefits, or harms, the environment. Why? Human welfare is intertwined with the welfare of the soil, air, water, and ecological systems on which we depend. In addition, God calls us to care for the material world independently of its usefulness to us (Genesis 2:15).
6. Members may evaluate their family roles – as spouse, parent, or child – and how they treat their friends. Encourage them to evaluate not only their specific jobs and workplaces, but their careers. How are they harmful to others? The harm may be to individuals, groups of people (through gender or racial prejudice), or to the environment (through waste products, careless use of energy, or poorly designed processes). The harm that we do may be indirect and unintentional. Ask members to brainstorm on how they can become (and encourage others to be) more sensitive of others' needs and more careful with the supporting environment – in their families, their specific workplaces, and the types of work they do.

Departing Hymn

"Voice That Calls Us Each by Name" is on pp. 47-49 of *Vocation*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

Following Our Vocation in Organizations

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how an organization's *charism*, or its mission and defining values, is similar to the personal vocation that God gives an individual.
2. To explore how living out our personal vocation requires us to negotiate the corporate vocations of the organizations in which we serve.
3. To consider whether the stages of adult life influence how we relate to organizations.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Vocation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. Locate the tune, ST. LEONARDS, for "May the Mind of Christ, My Savior" in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with Case Studies

Share the cases of Karl, Rachel, and Stan at the beginning of Smith's article. Conclude with this comment: "Karl, Rachel, and Stan were learning from experience that organizations – such as businesses, schools, congregations, community groups, professional guilds, or societies – have something akin to the vocations that God gives to persons.... Indeed, discerning their call requires making sense of these corporate vocations – enough sense so that there is a genuine connection between their personal vocations and those of the organizations in which they serve" (*Vocation*, pp. 36-37).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ecclesiastes 3:9-15 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Working within an organization can be either a wonderful *opportunity* for generous service in partnership with others, or a serious *roadblock* to discovering and living out our personal call. Which it will be, an opportunity or roadblock, often depends on how well our personal vocation relates to the corporate vocation, or the mission and defining values, of the organization.

This interplay between personal and corporate vocation is constantly changing. We may grow in understanding our call, develop our abilities and talents, or discover new interests and concerns. For instance, on a short-term mission experience we may gain a fresh awareness of the world's need and a deep desire to serve new friends. When we return home to our school, congregation, employer, and community, we may view our service through these organizations with very different eyes. Or the organizations in which we serve may change. Over time, they can become tired and wandering, or self-deceived, or even hypocritical about their vision. Even a healthy organization's "needs may change in a way that indicates it is time for us to contribute

our time and ability elsewhere," Smith writes. "This recognition is vital to the well-being of the organization as well as the long term fulfilment of our personal vocation."

Smith describes three skills we will need in order to "negotiate" this fluid relation to organizations: "reading" an organization's corporate vocation, having the proper differentiation between the organization and ourselves, and maintaining a kingdom perspective on our work.

Members may want to discuss these additional ideas in Smith's article: organizational *charisms* may be more or less difficult to discover; an organization's *charism* might be congruent with one person's call, but not another's; and our relation to organizations changes in characteristic ways in young, middle, and senior adulthood (see study question 4).

Study Questions

1. Asking these questions helps us discover an organization's *charism*: "For what purpose was this organization brought into being?" and "In what way does this institution or society or business reflect a way in which God is choosing to 'gift' the world?" Encourage members to describe the *charism* of the school they attend, a corporation or government agency where they work, or agency where they volunteer, a club to which they belong, etc. Discuss the mission and defining values of the congregation. Are these *charisms* easy to "read"?

Members may describe how being a part of an organization has led them to discover and develop their abilities, interests, and understanding of their roles within God's kingdom.

2. "A wholesome differentiation can free us from staying with an organization out of a misguided sense of obligation. But just as surely, such differentiation is a critical stance when it comes time to discern that we are to stay with a difficult situation, to persevere through a particularly frustrating set of circumstances. It enables us to ask, 'Is this the cross that I am being called to bear?' and to be a source of wisdom and strength in the midst of that difficulty," Smith writes (*Vocation*, p. 41). How do we discern whether to leave an organization, persevere in a difficult situation, or make an effort to reform an organization's mission and guiding values? To whom do members turn for advice and support?
3. Are we tempted to seek a *bigger* or *more famous* place to work? Do we seek *high profile* jobs and try to make the *most notable contributions* at work? In our culture we tend to think "bigger is better" and we borrow our identity from our "brand-name" clothing, clubs, and associations. How can these trends distort our commitment to a congregation, employer, or place of volunteer service?

Ask members to consider how they can measure the contribution to God's kingdom of the organizations in which they serve.

4. Young adults approach organizations as opportunities for learning and self-discovery. A danger is that we may see organizations only as ways to advance our personal careers.

In midlife, with a better understanding of our "talents, abilities, what really matters to us, and where and in what ways we might be called to steward the talent that God has given us," we should see organizations "as opportunities for generous service, for the exercise of our abilities in association with other people toward an end that can only be achieved through this partnership."

In senior years we distinguish ourselves from organizations; we "step back and away from formal structures of influence and authority, and choose a posture of benediction—granting blessing and wisdom, as they are called for, in ways that transcend the boundaries and lines of authority of these organizations."

Have members experienced a similar pattern of changing attitudes in their own or others' adult lives?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

The Dilbertization of Work

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how well *Dilbert* reflects the contemporary workplace in American culture.
2. To explore how we can hear and respond to God's call if we are trapped in disillusioning office work—doing a job that isn't meaningful, among unmotivated coworkers, and with an employer that doesn't care.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Vocation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. Locate the tune, LOBE DEN HERREN, for "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

"*Dilbert*, which appears in more newspapers than any other comic, symbolizes a paradigm shift in our approach to work. Older comics had a certain work ethos, displayed in characters like Dagwood Bumstead of *Blondie*. Dagwood might symbolize the workers of the World War II generation: a lifelong company man whose years of loyalty had earned him his own office. Mr. Dithers may have yelled at Dagwood when he fell asleep on the job, but Dagwood never worried about job security or corporate downsizing.

"Contrast this with *Dilbert*, the quintessential worker of the postmodern era. Despite *Dilbert*'s education and specialized training as an engineer, his work is meaningless and unsatisfactory. Instead of an office, he has a cubicle. And his coworkers drive him crazy....

"Some of us are deeply unsatisfied with our work, but we hang on because we need the paycheck. How do we think about work when we are unhappy with our jobs?" (*Vocation*, pp. 69-70).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read responsively together the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ecclesiastes 5:10-20 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Are members familiar with *Dilbert*? Ask them to share their favorite strips. You might collect a few examples from your newspaper. (Both recent episodes and a number of classic strips are available at the *Dilbert* website, www.Dilbert.com.) Using these examples, highlight some of the themes that run through this comic strip.

In Richard Florida's study, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, workers named challenge, flexibility, and stability as the most significant of thirty-eight marks of job satisfaction. Money ranked fourth. Ask members if they agree with this ranking. Would they put something else near the top of the list? Call attention to the similarity between this list and the recommendation of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes 5:10-20.

Following the article by Al Hsu (pronounced "shee"), the study offers three suggestions to those who are frustrated in a *Dilbert*-like job: discover who you are, look past success to significance, and discern and follow

God's calling with courage. Sometimes we become trapped in meaningless work because we did not know enough about our vocation (including our interests and abilities) to find a good fit, we valued money or prestige above doing work that is significant within God's kingdom, or we lack the courage to make the required changes in ourselves, workplaces, or careers.

Study Questions

1. You can find the most recent strips and some classic strips at www.Dilbert.com. Encourage *Dilbert* fans to reflect on why they enjoy reading *Dilbert*. Have they known coworkers like the characters in the strip, or workplace problems like those in the strip?

Some members may not like the comic strip. Hsu admits that its unrelenting cynicism is off-putting: "The cynicism that suffuses [*Dilbert* creator, Scott Adams'] cartoons, though amusing to a point, does not reflect the gospel hope offered by the One to whom he is called." On the other hand, Hsu recommends the strip's critique of workaholism.

2. Hsu compares "feeling God's pleasure" to "what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls 'optimal experience' or 'flow,' those times when we are completely immersed and satisfied with our work or activity. In contemporary terms, we might say that these are times that we feel like we're 'in the zone.'" When do members experience this? Does it depend on working conditions, compatibility with coworkers, having a challenging assignment, being well compensated, or other factors?

Experiencing "flow" may be a good indicator that our work fits our calling, but some Christians are called to difficult positions of service. Is it possible that they "feel God's pleasure" even though their work is no picnic? Consider Michael Novak's observation: "Enjoying what we do is not always a feeling of enjoyment; it is sometimes the gritty resolution a man or a woman shows in doing what must be done—perhaps with inner dread and yet without whimpering self-pity" (quoted in "Other Voices," *Vocation*, p. 59).

3. We should pray regularly for individuals who cannot find work, or whose jobs are unfulfilling. When we are trapped in a meaningless job, God may be calling us to change (1) ourselves (our attitudes or skills) to fit the job, (2) find a new employer, or (3) change our job or career. In the first instance, we can help individuals see the significance of their work, or to develop their language, writing, or computing skills in order to be more successful. In the second, we might recommend new employers; we might invite them to work with us. In the third, we might help them explore more meaningful careers, even supporting them in a "trial run" of a new occupation.

Sometimes we should encourage individuals to persevere in their current job. When might we do this, and how can we support them in enduring a frustrating situation?

4. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes warns against the love of money (5:10-12), which is one version of "frenetic self-assertion." Other ways involve the disordered desire for notoriety, promotion, or power in the workplace. We often identify ourselves by our place of employment or career. How can our work become a form of competition with others? Do members know someone who took a job, moved to another employer, or accepted a promotion primarily as a way of self-assertion?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.