



Are We Going on a Vocation Now? Ministry with Youth as a Lifelong Vocation

My previous lecture ended by answering the question “are we going on a vocation now?” with a decisive “yes” in terms of youth: the life-purposes of youth are indeed tied up with the purposes of the living God. What about those who minister with youth: Are we also going on a vocation now? The church offers a rather mixed and confusing response to this question. In one instance the church positions youth ministry as if it should be the salvation of a church caught up in its survival needs and seemingly in the throes of its own death rattle. And in another instance, it treats youth ministry as an ancillary and trivial ministry of the church for which the major qualifications appear to be proximity to the ages of the youth and willingness to work for little compensation, instead of as a full and legitimate ministry of the church carried out by adults of various ages with particular gifts and interests for that ministry.

Of course, there are many exceptions to these caricatures, even including some larger churches where the head of staff/senior pastor leads the youth ministry or other churches in which youth involvement in the church is so completely integrated that the youth alongside adults have a primary role in determining the mission, budget priorities, worship life, and other practices of that church. What I am concerned about, however, is the tendency of mainline Protestant congregations to treat ministry with youth as something other than a full, authentic call to ministry, and to treat those who do it as people merely preparing for a future, “real” vocation of ministry with adults. Such a perspective ties ministry to ordination rather than to the baptism into Christian community in which all are called to serve. It operates out of a theology of church leadership that positions some Christians as “more Christian” and as “more ministerial” than others, setting them above others rather than alongside others who also have gifts, however different.

In this lecture, then, I want to continue to look at theological perspectives on Christian calling and youth ministry, this time in terms of the call of adults to be experienced companions and guides alongside youth in practicing Christian faith in a lifelong vocation of ministry with young people.

As I do this, I will be making some particular theological claims about persons in ministry with youth: (1) Youth ministers are people who share with all Christians the one call to ministry that comes from God in Christ. (2) God's Spirit gives certain gifts to people with a vocation for youth ministry, gifts given in community for the common good. (3) As a particular kind of ministry, the vocation of youth ministry draws its meaning, character, and work from the one call to ministry and from God's calling of youth.

What's in a Name?

My first called position in ministry after seminary was to be a chaplain and therapist in an adolescent chemical dependency treatment program in Minnesota. It was a rather "unconventional" kind of youth ministry—no ice-breakers or games of sardines in the church basement. Imagine a youth ministry setting in which a lock-in there meant that a young person had become threatening or combative and needed to be secluded in a safe room.

The young people who went there, some as young as eleven or twelve, were kids who had lost everything. Some still lived with their families but basically used their homes as hotels; many lived on the streets, having run away or been kicked out of their homes. They came from small towns and big cities, Indian reservations and suburbs. They were broken people who had given up everything that matters in life—family, friends, self-respect, health, creativity—for the one thing that now mattered to them, their next high. These were kids who had stared death in the face more than once and dared it to strike them down. But if they were lucky, a family member or the courts stepped in, and they came into treatment.

Many had been wounded by adults who abused them physically or sexually. Many had been wounded by their religion, which had labeled them as "bad kids" or judged them in other ways. Some of them wanted nothing to do with a god who they perceived as having taken away their mother or baby brother in a car accident or having let their father walk out on them last year; a god they thought just sat by and allowed them to be raped or beaten up. Many were afraid of a god who seemed capricious or at best unknowable. A large part of my work involved inviting them toward a spirituality that could give life; a faith that could support their sobriety; a way of making spiritual and religious sense of their deep yearnings and their desperate pains, both of which they'd tried to cover up with drugs.

I'll never forget the morning when, as I finished leading a group for youth with grief and loss issues, one of the young people who was just about to finish treatment was introducing a new fourteen-year old who'd just



arrived. “She’s the chaplain here,” he said, pointing to me. “What’s that?” “Oh,” replied the more “senior” youth giving a new definition to ecumenical and specialized ministries, “a chaplain is a minister who doesn’t believe in anything!” Try writing that into your statement of faith for your presbytery’s committee on ministry! He must have seen the look on my face because he quickly added, “Well, she believes all kinds of stuff, but she’ll talk to anybody. You don’t have to be Catholic or Baptist or whatever for her to care.”

On the one hand, a name is just a label—a convenient way to identify someone or the role that person holds. To that young person in treatment, the title “chaplain” held a host of meanings about ministry that contrasted me, the person so identified, with other kinds of ministries he had known. On the other hand, though, it matters a great deal by what name something or someone is called, because the name becomes a kind of shorthand or code, signifying the possibilities and limits, the tasks and the meanings associated with the thing or person. What is our name, we who do ministry with youth? Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster advocate imagining ourselves as “Godbearers” with youth, to redefine ministry as a “holy pursuit rather than a service profession.”¹ While I will be surprised to see that term anytime soon on the back of the church bulletin where the staff are listed (Hmmm, let’s see: Pastor—Dr. John Smith; Minister of Music—Sally Singer; Godbearer—??), their point is well taken. In too many contexts, the title “youth minister” seems synonymous with “recreation director” or “social service director,” rather than with Christian ministry. Which leads me to a rather key question: Is youth ministry a vocation? Can it go by the name of a “calling”?

Vocation and Youth Ministry

At risk of alienating many people, I am about to give a difficult response to that question: No, fundamentally speaking, youth ministry is NOT a vocation. Now, before you say, “well, I guess that’s the end of that,” let me explain what I mean. As I search the meanings of this concept of call or vocation in Scripture and in theology, what I recognize is that there is only one general call for Christians. God calls all of us. Period.

But, God gives us gifts that equip us to live out that one call in lots of different and particular ways. So, we read the writer of Ephesians saying, “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry...” (Ephesians 4:11). Those particularities are certainly part of the call, but they derive from the one call of God to new life in Christ.

Let me say it in a slightly different way. God calls us by choosing us as God's own in Christ. It is the call to be Christian. Or, as Karl Barth put it, vocation is what distinguishes the Christian from the non-Christian: "The goal of vocation is not a special Christian existence, but the existence of the Christian as such, and that the existence of the Christian is either grounded in [his/her] vocation or not at all."² The language of a "call to ministry" has come into our vocabulary as Christian writers and thinkers try to give some flesh to what this idea of calling to be Christian might mean concretely in our lives. The specific ways we live lives marked by God's grace—i.e., the kinds of work we do like youth ministry or nursing or carpentry, the relationships we have, the patterns of living and stewardship that make up our way of witnessing to the world—come from the particular gifts God's Spirit gives us and from the continuing renewal of our call such that our identity in Christ really is "new every morning."

Paul in the letter to the Romans asserts that God's call is "according to his purpose" (Rom. 8: 28). He then goes on, in a passage simultaneously responsible for both the theological brilliance and major theological conundrum within the Reformed tradition, to claim that people called by God are "chosen," "predestined," to use that trouble-making word, to participate in God's larger providential purposes on a cosmic scale: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family [literally 'many brothers']. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Romans 8:28-30). We don't have the luxury of time that would allow the detailed treatment of this passage that its complexity warrants. For now, note once again that the Pauline notion of vocation seems to work against the idea that our vocations are much of our own making. It is God who does the calling; God into whose purposes our human purposiveness is enfolded; God whose purposes are cosmic in scope and far beyond our grasp. (This in spite of the efforts of some Presbyterians at present to put increasingly narrow strictures around who God is "allowed" to call, justify, and glorify!) The bottom line for Paul is that God is the one who calls us, and our call comes out of God's choosing us.

When I was in seminary and going through the candidacy process in the Presbyterian church, I reached a point where, whenever I had to answer some question about my call to ministry—as in, "describe your call to



Christian ministry and how it is developing through your seminary education”—I began to feel about the same way I felt when someone on the street or a bus walks up to me and asks, “Are you saved?” Well, I always want to say, it depends on what you mean by that. Call to ministry? Vocation? Are we talking about that in terms of what I am doing right now, or the whole big picture of “joining the purpose of my life with the purpose of God?”

The answer, of course, is that most of the time we are talking about both together: call with a capital “C” meaning the one call of God that comes in our baptism (our initiation as Christian) and call with a lower case “c” meaning the particulars of how we witness to God’s saving grace in our lives in a given time and place. But usually the real focus in everyday conversation is on call with a small “c”—as in, “I have a call as a youth minister in a congregation in Boulder.” Or, as in, “youth ministry is my calling.” It becomes easy, therefore, to confuse the particular call, which is really an expression of the gifts of the Spirit, with the general Call on which it depends.

Perhaps it would be more accurate, and less nerve wracking, for me to say that youth ministry is a vocation—lower-case v—that depends on and is derived from the larger vocation of being a Christian. Set in that light, the vocation of youth ministry is indeed a vocation, and, I would argue, a life-long vocation in the community of faith. I’ve done a lot of different kinds of ministry. I’ve been a youth minister, a seminary professor; a mission coworker in the Philippines, a volunteer in mission in Korea, a local church pastor, a hospital chaplain, a clinical social worker, and a therapist. All of them include ministry with youth in some respect. And all these different forms of work, together with many other roles and relationships, are part of the *one lifelong vocation of Christian ministry to which I am called*. And together, our shared calling to Christian ministry, carried out in its many different forms, constitutes us as the Body of Christ alive and active in the world.

Discerning the Call

How can you tell you have a calling to any kind of ministry, much less to youth ministry? Quaker educator Parker Palmer writes in *Let Your Life Speak* about his own vocational journey, beginning with an awareness in his thirties that “it is indeed possible to live a life other than one’s own,” to “wear other people’s faces.”³ It may be that in church work we are especially at risk of this tendency to wear someone else’s face, given the lineage system by which so many enter the ministry. Surely you have said it yourself, or heard someone else say, “my grandfather was a Presbyterian minister; my

father was a Presbyterian minister, and now I am going to be a Presbyterian minister when I finish seminary.” (Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your point of view, mine was not. My mother was a Presbyterian elder in the last years of her life. Of course, most people don’t know that my granddaddy was a Pentecostal preacher and Bible and snake oil salesman in Appalachia, but that’s another story for a different time.) Those who seem to fall into their life vocations through family lineage may be recipients of a special clarity about what their life work is—or they may spend a lifetime struggling to know if the call they respond to comes from God or from family expectations. For Palmer, the vocational quest is most basically a process of listening to one’s own life to hear what that life is, and allowing that authentic life to speak through one’s work, relationships, and actions in the world, rather than imposing onto the self a life other than one’s own, knit from notions of what and who one “ought” to be.

I really appreciate Palmer’s writing, particularly his willingness in this book to acknowledge the points of brokenness and limitation in his personal battle with depression that are also part of his genuine vocational quest. I like the way he wrestles with vocation as an issue of getting the inside person and the outside person to match: people living out of a deep integrity of vocation, he says, “*decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside.*”⁴ Interestingly, his phrase rings similar to the way Erik Erikson talks about the task of identity formation in youth as the process by which there comes to be a coherence in the roles and meanings a person has in himself or herself and the roles and meanings that person has for others. Palmer speaks of it as the match between inner truth and outer actions.

What is that inner truth for you? Probably you have more than one of them. One of the inner truths directing my vocation is a deep-in-the-bones knowledge I have about the power of a faith community to bless a struggling young person into new life. It is a knowledge that enables me to listen to and be with discarded, hurting teenagers in a special way. I am aware that this kind of knowledge makes me a little bit weird in the world of youth ministry, because it means I do some of my best work with youth who are drunks and pushers and prostitutes; youth who are victims of abuse or other violence, or maybe just victims of poverty; youth whose grief is so deep that they often do not make their way through the doors of our churches. Yes, I have some special education that helps equip me to do this kind of ministry. But the deep-in-the-bones part for me comes from life experience that is risky to share, as Palmer suggests in his disclosures about depression, because it



relates to brokenness. Ironically, in a church that affirms in creed that the salvific power of Christ comes from self-emptying, weakness, and brokenness on a cross, we church folk still seem to require each other to dwell in the land of heroic success and having it all together with no visible signs of brokenness.

All of us know about brokenness in some form or another. I certainly do. During my adolescence some pretty deep pain had me staring death in the face more times than I would like to remember. That's not the most important part of the story in terms of my vocation, although it does mean I know some things about walking in the valley of the shadow of death that shape who I am. The part of the story that matters for my vocation is that once there was a pastor and this little congregation of folks on the edge of town, who together believed that God might just be up to something in their midst. And they thought the something probably included youth—even the ones like me who were not always easy to include. In that little church, we did mission together and worshiped together, ate and played and prayed together. I learned to “think theologically” there, and it was in that small faith community that I first experienced the transforming power of education for faith, of theological education.

They were not perfect. No church is. They had their fights over budgets and property, race relations and our responsibility to the poor of our city, and, in that day and age, whether women should be on the session of the church. But what I remember the most is that in the times when the struggle in my life was too great and I could not even get myself to show up for church, I still knew there were five or six families there who would take me in if I needed a place to go, and so sometimes I called them and they did that. And I am literally alive today because there was a pastor who had a vocation of ministry with youth, who led a congregation in their vocation of ministry with youth, a ministry in which they blessed me with the knowledge of being God's beloved and of knowing that God had a purpose that somehow included the purpose of my life, a ministry in which I could be part of something bigger than my own small, hurting world.

Now, as an adult, when the work I do and the life I lead bear some traces of that inner truth—a truth that knows the power of blessing, the transformative practices of education and care, the wonder of a new day alive for relationships, the joy of creative thinking and being able to use my mind—then I know I am living my own life, “leaning into my true calling,” as one friend says.

So basically I think Palmer has it right when he names the need for some

coherence between these kinds of deep “inner truths” that inform vocation, and the outer expressions of vocation through the way we live our lives and what we spend the most time doing. How, then, can Christians tell when a particular calling is “real,” or authentic?

One rather pronounced trajectory in some theologies holds that the truth of a call may be known when one has expended all efforts to resist it and finally must give in, surrender, to that calling. I’m sure it happens that way for some folks. But as a general theory of the validity of a call, the resistance/surrender theory has some problems. It pits human and divine desires against each other in an unfair match in which God always wins, in such a way to make it seem like human desires are *necessarily* opposed to God’s. In fact, this is not good Reformed theology either, because in justification and sanctification, our natural abilities and desires are transformed into the service of God.

I find a more helpful perspective on discerning the authenticity of a call to ministry in the simple language of Frederick Bueckner’s contention that joy and desire are from God too and yet must be “tested” in light of the norm of the world’s deep needs. As Bueckner asserts, vocation involves

the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you’ve presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you’ve missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you’re bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren’t helping your patients much either.⁵

Let us think now about how such an idea of vocation relates to ministry with youth.

Youth Ministry as a Ministry That Blesses Young People in Their Calling

Over the last ten or so years, I have had the opportunity and privilege of interviewing many youth, particularly adolescent girls, in an effort to learn from them about faith, their senses of identity, and their life experiences. Jana, who at the time of our interview was a sixteen-year-old, Anglo-American young woman from the upper Midwest attending a large public high school, spoke about how important her church youth group and its



Friday night “teen scene,” a drop-in youth club sponsored by parents as an alternative (read: no sex, no alcohol) social gathering place for youth, was to her.

“I wouldn’t know what else to do on a Friday or a Sunday night. It’s just where I need to be. Besides, it keeps our parents from worrying about, you know, what we might be doing or whatever. Kids get into so much trouble these days. My youth pastor, he’s really nice. It’s his job to make sure we like to come, so that when we graduate we’ll all still want to come back to church and be on the session and stuff.” Jana praised this “youth pastor” at length. The relationship was obviously important to her. At the same time, though, Jana, like many of the girls I have interviewed, indicated that while she enjoys that relationship along with the camaraderie and fellowship of her peers in the church youth group, she is practically starving for opportunities to have in-depth discussions of theological questions. “I know it makes me weird, even to other people in my youth group,” Jana said, “but these things are real issues for me and not just brain games. It’s like—my dad’s Jewish, and my mom and I are Christian. Is my dad going to hell? I don’t even know if I believe in hell. It’s confusing. I need to talk about that and to learn some more about what my church believes about other religions. But in my youth group, we mostly go bowling.”

What vocation does the church hold out for Jana to embrace? While I do not wish to detract from its many benefits and the strong points of the youth ministry at Jana’s church (I am not against fun or recreation! Both are essential elements of all kinds of ministry!), it is apparent that much of what goes on there takes a defensive posture: youth ministry as a prevention for the troubles teens will otherwise get into; youth ministry as an insurance policy for the future of the church. From what Jana and many others have said, instead of inviting youth into key practices of Christian faith communities by calling them to a life richly informed by service, prayer, critical reflection, and interpretation of sacred texts, the main “call” to which the church invites these young people to respond is the call to be entertained and to stay out of trouble.

Sharon Daloz Parks, writing on young people who are “twenty-something” and beyond, upholds this same concern in a way that fits our youth ministry context when she says:

Another growing concern is that too many of our young adults are not being encouraged to ask the big questions that awaken critical thought in the first place. Swept up in religious assumptions that remain unexamined (and economic assumptions that function

religiously), they easily become vulnerable to the conventional cynicism of our time or to the economic and political agendas of a consumption-driven yet ambivalent age”⁶

In a culture that holds out the vocation of being a good consumer to youth, it is all too easy for the church to simply invite young people to become good consumers of church, instead of inviting them to live out their calling. A congregation practicing its identity as what James Fowler refers to as “an ecology of vocations” could be a place where youth ask big questions and dream worthy dreams, where they bless the call of youth.⁷

What if we were to start our thinking about the character and tasks of youth ministry with the simple affirmation that the young people themselves are called by God? What if we stopped thinking of our ministry with them as a program and started understanding our task to be the work of blessing the call that youth already have from God, of helping youth discern and develop their gifts for ministry? Of course we would still need to do much of what we already “do”—relational ministry and fellowship, Bible study and, yes, maybe even bowling, service learning and mission, and critical reflection on it all. But to reframe those tasks in terms of how we support the vocations of youth occasions a real shift in our understanding of the vocation of youth ministry.

Blessing the call that youth have from God and helping them discern and develop their gifts for ministry is a task that only the church can do. Schools can give their kinds of blessings—affirmations through grades and praise of gifts and skills that youth show as they move through the curriculum. Parents can do their part. But only a community of persons practicing the faith together, living out the one call to be “partners in Christ’s service,” can help a young person recognize and understand their gifts *in terms of* vocation in Christ. By now you know I’m not talking about figuring out which kids are good at staffing the church nursery and who can pour the coffee during the fellowship hour without burning somebody! There is such a tendency to convert the question “what skills and gifts do youth in the church have” into the matching of youth with the domestic labors inside the church building. No, I’m talking about how only people who know they are called by God and who are striving to live a life true to their calling are qualified to help a young person interpret her or his life as a vocation in Christ.

The vision of youth ministry I am pointing to here is one grounded in a Reformed doctrine of Christian vocation, in which youth ministry becomes a ministry that empowers the wider community of the church to bless kids. That reframes youth ministry as a ministry *to* the whole church, a ministry




in which the church itself is transformed from a program agency in relation to youth, to a “people called out” to nurture the vocations of youth-called-out. I want to end, then, with a snapshot of my vision for what some of these vocation-nurturing practices of youth ministry would include:

- 1. The practice of God’s radical hospitality, where everyone knows they are welcome—really welcome.** Welcome in their own bodies and whatever kinds of clothes they wear; welcome enough to share their music. (My colleague Evelyn Parker at Perkins School of Theology recently remarked that youth listen to Mary Mary’s “Thankful” in part because it is “body music” and so much church music is not body music.) Welcome them even if and when it seems scary. Welcome them when they look like they have it together and when they don’t. Welcome them by breaking down the dividing wall between “us and them...”
- 2. The practice of naming and affirming the gifts of youth.** I know a teen who has an amazing ability to plan and coordinate details; another whose face is like a barometer for the emotions of a group of people she’s with; another with incredible computer abilities. On the one hand, these are “common” gifts. But I know I have never reflected with these teens about their gifts as part of their godly vocation, their call to service. In a vocation-nurturing practice of youth ministry, the church (meaning us) helps youth see their gifts in terms of the call, interpreting and using these gifts in ways that address the “world’s deep needs”—a fostering of the gifts of the spirit as public and communal, for the good of the world. In Lois Lowry’s novel *The Giver*, she describes a future society in which children at each age are recognized in an annual ceremony for the new abilities that come at that age level. Around age nine, the community of elders begins to observe the young people carefully as they go about their schooling, play, and expected volunteer service, in order to discern their gifts. At the ceremony of twelve-year olds (i.e., the ceremony marking the children’s passage to their twelfth year of age), the elders identify the kind of work chosen for that young person, based on their gifts and the needs of the community.⁸ Certainly there is a shadow side to this process of having one’s lifelong vocation chosen so early and by others. It risks locking persons in to the kinds of gifts and interests they display at one single and rather early point in their lives, without leaving much room for growth, shifts, and changes that may come later. But Lowry’s image remains suggestive nevertheless. What if we in the church paid

such careful attention to the desires and abilities of youth, and helped them see how those could fit with the needs of the world? What if we in the church took seriously our role as “elders” in the vocational discernment and development of the young people in our midst?

- 3. Mentoring by accompaniment—adults who mentor youth in the practices of faith, like service, prayer, Sabbath keeping, and interpretation of Scripture, by walking alongside them, “accompanying” them in doing these things.** I’m not talking about “mumbling prayers.” I’m talking about the kind of accompaniment where young people and adults sit down together and share how they are noticing God in their lives; share what’s hard and what’s sad and what’s awesome about being in those lives right now; and then learn lots of different practices of prayer that become ways for fostering the relationship between God and youth and the adults who bless them. I’m talking about adults who are willing to model vulnerability of trying to understand Scripture by studying it together and of trying to participate in mending a broken world by serving together in mission.

A church that continually blesses youth is one in which youth and adults together are going on a vocation now, where youth ministry is a ministry *to and of* the whole church, inviting that blessing to happen over and over again, just as the Spirit of God works in us afresh each new time and each new day. May it be so in our lives and our ministries with youth; may God bless you and me to bless the vocations of youth. Amen! 

NOTES

1. Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998), p. 50.
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. 4:3b, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962), p. 524.
3. Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1999), p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 32 (italics in original).
5. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 95.
6. Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. xii.
7. James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), pp. 115-116.
8. Lois Lowry, *The Giver* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993).