Training Board of Pensions Consultants in the Theological Basis of the Pre-Retirement Seminar

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Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

TRAINING BOARD OF PENSIONS CONSULTANTS IN THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF
THE PRE-RETIREMENT SEMINAR

Written by

KEN GREEN

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary
upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

Gary Neal Hansen

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Date Received: April 9, 2020
TRAINING BOARD OF PENSIONS CONSULTANTS IN THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF THE PRE-RETIREMENT SEMINAR

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
KEN GREEN
APRIL 2020
ABSTRACT

Training Board of Pensions Consultants in the Theological Basis for the Pre-Retirement Seminar
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2020

The goal of this doctoral project is to provide a short monograph on a theological understanding of vocation in retirement. This will further the theological grounding for the work of the consultants and staff of the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) who prepare and present pre-retirement seminars to church workers. The document previously used was written for pastors by a seminary president. However, the demographics of the participants are changing, creating a need for a document written in a more conversational style for an audience with less formal theological education.

The project reviewed relevant literature, drawing from the Patristic period and the Protestant theological tradition, as well as considering current understandings of vocation and calling in retirement. Gregory of Nazianzus’ emphasis on transformation is considered along with his personal wrestling with the weight of pastoral authority. The work of Martin Luther broadened the understanding of vocation from a merely ecclesiastical use to include the work of all Christians. Three contemporary authors writing on vocation or calling generally or particularly for those entering retirement age serve to move the theological conversation from the past into the present.

The products of this project include a fresh monograph on calling in retirement, a set of reflection questions for those preparing for the seminar, and a set of questions for group discussion within the seminar. While the Growing Into Tomorrow . . . Today seminar has itself been retired, its successor THRIVE is being introduced. The resources of this project may be incorporated into the new seminar. To that end, interview questions for the staff who will be tasked with presenting the new seminar are included as a means of feedback on the offered resources. A survey is also provided for these resources to be evaluated by participants.

Content Reader: Gary Neal Hansen, PhD

Words: 293
To my beloved wife, the Rev. Dr. Tassie Green, who encourages and inspires me and to my remarkable children, Carlina and Michael, whom only God loves more than I do.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my former boss Cindy Beach who helped start me on this project and my current bosses Doug Portz and Andy Browne for their patience as I completed it. I am also grateful to Raymond Bonwell whose excitement about vocation helped jumpstart my own. Much of what I know about God’s calling in retirement I know from working with and watching Jan and Harris Schultz, Jake and Millie Marshall, Ruth and John Hicks, Bob and Connie Wade and Alice Petersen, Retirement Planning Consultants of the Board of Pensions. Your faithfulness in following Jesus into the next stages of your journey continues to inspire me with confidence on my own.
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PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

Whether we are engaged in ministry as our primary vocation or we live out our lives in other forms of work, as Christians we believe we are called by God to use our particular talents and gifts in service to God and humanity. Then, by choice or circumstance, we retire, and it seems we are no longer called. In a culture where people frequently spend decades of their lives retired, this presents significant problems, both theological and pastoral.

The Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (hereafter PC (USA)) is one of six agencies of the national church and is charged with providing benefits, assistance, and education to the members of The Benefits Plan of the Board of Pensions (hereafter, the plan) who are employees of churches, mid-councils, and other organizations with formal ties to the PC (USA). The flagship seminar offered to members of the plan is the pre-retirement seminar Growing Into Tomorrow... Today (or GITT hereafter). In the two years I spent as an Education Specialist for the Board, one of my primary roles was as the presenter of the financial and benefit content of this seminar. I worked in conjunction with a retired clergy person and spouse who presented other holistic content on retirement in the areas of identity, health, relationships, housing or living arrangements, and ethical separation from a pastoral position. I also had the privilege of attending one of these seminars with my wife (also a PC (USA) pastor), which is how I became aware of the seminar initially and how I came to be recruited by the Board. The benefit to my family me was immediate in terms of our awareness of and
ability to prepare for retirement. This personal experience helped me to feel called to the Board in a ministry supporting and encouraging fellow pastors and church workers to care for themselves and prepare for their next stage of life and ministry. With that as the internal sense of calling, the external validation of that came in the form of the Board’s staff recruiting me because of two very different pastoral positions I had held, and my experience as a college instructor and corporate trainer with significant experience teaching adults in both academic and professional contexts. This external affirmation of my fit for the role were bolstered by the high regard in which the seminar is held by those who have attended it. Two sample comments from participants are representative: “Very informative. Thought-provoking information about planning for future and retirement.” And, “This thorough, detailed seminar and the supporting materials are engaging, positive, and extremely helpful.”

While this seminar has been offered for several decades and has been received with great appreciation from attendees, the Board is aware of limitations in the seminar’s current configuration. One potential weakness is that the seminar was designed primarily by and for clergy, while the make-up of those attending these seminars is increasingly mixed lay and clergy. The Board has conscientiously sought to make more employment benefits accessible (affordable) to more churches so that more lay employees of the church can be eligible for these benefits. As the demographic represented in the benefits

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plan ages and anticipates retirement, the Board’s seminar needs to be welcoming and accessible to them. The demographics of seminar participants will be discussed in more detail near the end of chapter 1. With all the above context in mind, my boss at the time—the former Director of Member Education—invited me to pursue arranging a replacement piece for Jack Stott’s monograph on retirement. This will be discussed more fully in chapter 1.

The Board of Pensions has been offering twenty to thirty-five pre-retirement seminars a year in various formats since 1982. Annual attendance is usually between 350 and 500 participants. It is currently led by a church consultant from the Board’s field staff and a retirement planning consultant couple. A short monograph by Jack Stotts, former president of Austin Theological Seminary, informs the work of the seminar leaders and an even briefer version is included in the pre-seminar work sent to participants.  

These two resources will be discussed in detail in chapter 1. The seminar participants are employees (and spouses) from Presbyterian churches and related agencies, and currently are primarily clergy; there is likely to be an increase in demand from clergy for pre-retirement preparation as 75 percent of the Presbyterian pastors currently serving will be retirement-eligible in the next ten years.  

The stakes are high. As Gary Harbaugh notes in his forward to Gwen Halaas’ seminal work *Clergy, Retirement, and Wholeness,* “Maintaining social and vocational health are difficult challenges during active ministry.

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. . . identity and social function is entirely defined by [our] occupation . . . which leaves a gaping hole in retirement.”

Pre-retirement education and preparation are especially needed by those who serve the church.

However, despite this increase in clergy demand, the Board’s expectation is that the demographic of seminar participants is in the process of changing as more non-clergy employees enter the plan. As Stott’s monograph is written for a clergy audience, in both style and language, the Board wants a theological grounding for their seminars that will also invite engagement and reflection by lay people considering their own calling in life and ministry in retirement. This is especially important as the changes made to the benefits plan of the church are already increasing the number of lay people who are covered by the Board of Pensions’ benefits.

Presbyterians are no strangers to thinking theologically about vocation. If the number of times he is cited, quoted, or referred to in sermons is any indication, novelist and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner’s brief (only 206 words) but evocative reflection on vocation from Wishful Thinking has had an impact on the protestant world disproportionate to its length. His brevity, simplicity, and elegant prose have made his one of the most known and loved perspectives on vocation in the American Christian experience.

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4 Gwen Wagstrom Halaas, Clergy Retirement, and Wholeness: Looking Forward to the Third Age (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005), ix.

5 Todd Ingves, Director of Information Management, Board of Pensions, email to author, November 11, 2019.
Acknowledging that many kinds of voices can be calling one to different kinds of work, Frederick Buechner offers this gem: “The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.”6 After providing a pithy example of each he concludes “Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”7 Buechner’s constructive tension between individual desires and the world’s need have deeply influenced my own thinking, but also invited me to consider more carefully my own understanding of vocation grounded in my own Protestant (mostly Reformed) tradition as a resource for my colleagues anticipating retirement.

This project will articulate a fresh theology of call in retirement and develop resources to provide training for staff leaders of the Growing Into Tomorrow . . . Today seminar to establish a framework within which all participants (lay and clergy) can explore and discern God’s ongoing call on their lives as they prepare to retire from paid employment. As a preview, this project will consider vocation through both a biblical and theological lens. The Protestant Reformation produced a significant change in understanding vocation. To help illustrate this, the literature review begins with a Patristic example before considering a Protestant perspective from the Reformation era, and then look at Mark Labberton’s recent articulation of call, along with two other relatively recent reflections on the subject focusing on vocation in retirement. The


7 Ibid.
theological reflection considers three biblical call stories for individuals at different life stages: young (Mary), middle-age (Paul), old age (Abraham). Listening to and following the Lord who speaks is significant in each. Then aging and the stewardship of giftedness will be considered before concluding with a look at ecclesiology and how the church is intended to encompass multiple generations.

The ministry initiative includes three tools to help the seminar leaders better prepare for the changing make-up of seminar attendees. First, a fresh monograph articulating a theology of vocation or call in retirement including questions for reflection which can also be included with the pre-work for participants. This comprises chapter 5. Second, outlines with suggested texts/hymns/prayers with which to frame each day of the seminar comprise Appendices A-D. Third, a new discussion exercise to encourage reflection and conversation about one’s own giftedness and the potential needs in the community where the participant envisions retiring comprises Appendix E.
CHAPTER 1:

CONCERN FOR THOSE WHO SERVE THE CHURCH: THE CREATION OF A
PRE-RETIREMENT SEMINAR

The Minutes of the 194th General Assembly (GA) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (the old “northern church”) in the last GA before the reunion in 1983 with the PCUS (the old “southern church) record a significant event for the Board of Pensions. “Research in 1980 . . . revealed that members of the . . . plan . . . would benefit from additional help in [retirement planning].”1 This resulted in a joint staff team of the Vocation Agency of the GA and the Board of Pensions charged “to explore the need and possible resources for retirement planning.”2 Furthermore the Pension Fund was identified as a potential funding source for such efforts and that such services “could be defined as a benefit under the Board’s charter.” This was the beginning of the Board of Pensions taking an official role in providing pre-retirement

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2 Ibid.
planning for its members, composed primarily of pastors and other employees of Presbyterian churches PC (USA) mid-councils, and affiliated organizations.

**Early Holistic Structure**

More information was gathered, and the Minutes from 1983 (the GA in which reunion was approved) indicate that proposals for testing and implementation would proceed in 1984 and 1985 and by 1986 two Retirement Planning Associates (RPAs) had been appointed to coordinate the pilot programs and their evaluation, anticipating the beginning of a nationwide program by 1987. The RPAs were employed by the Board of Pensions, giving ownership of the program to the Board from the original combined staff team from Office of GA and the Board. This was accomplished, and the GA minutes in 1988 report that thirty-six workshops were held with some 830 members and spouses attending of the roughly 7,500 members over age fifty for whom the program was targeted.3 These workshops were holistic in nature, “based on materials prepared by the National Council on Aging and includes such areas of interest as lifestyle planning, financial concerns, health, interpersonal relations, living arrangements, and leisure and work options.”4 The seminar was begun in the southern church by Cecil Haniford, a layperson with a background in insurance. The original education staff members of the Board of Pensions including the Rev. David Rich, the Director of Retirement Planning

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3 Minutes of the General Assembly of the UPCUSA, 1982; Board of Pensions report: Reference X-154A.

4 Minutes of the 199th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 1988, 35.024 “Retirement Planning.”
and the initial Retirement Planning Consultants, Jim and Cheryl Graham, Bob and Mary Bankhead, and Tino and Esther Ballesteros received training from the National Council on Aging.\(^5\) Not surprisingly, given the source, though holistic (i.e. not just financial) the training was secular in nature, and any theological perspective was provided by those leading the seminars. The final version of the GITT was a two-day event with content going back and forth between financial considerations and holistic content. The section titles of the GITT seminar were Envisioning Retirement, Financial Planning Statements, Employer Benefits and Social Security, Retirement Income Profile, Vocation and Identity, Life Balance, Health, Individual Savings, Housing, Next Steps, Medicare and Long-Term Care, and Next Steps. The components that are primarily financial comprised four hours forty-five minutes of the fifteen and a half hours of content, while the holistic content was accorded five and a half of those same fifteen and a half hours. A typical agenda for the most recent offering of the GITT is included as Appendix A. In his role directing Retirement Planning from 1992-2002, Rev. Rich worked to address issues specific to clergy in the materials and resources used for the seminars. This included the invitation to the Rev. Dr. Jack Stotts to address the team responsible for preparing and presenting the seminars to engage the idea of retirement theologically.\(^6\)

\(^5\) Jim Graham, interview with author, November 4, 2019.

\(^6\) David Rich and Deb McKinley, interview with author, October 28, 2019.
Implicit Theology of Call

As noted above, the seminars were led by retired clergy and frequently spouses, and began with informal corporate worship, including singing, Scripture, and prayers. The focus varied by leader, but, informed by Reformed theology and their seminary education and Presbyterian pastoral experience, tended to emphasize God’s sovereignty and the call extended to Christians at their baptism. The priesthood of all believers and the sanctity of common work are embedded in a Protestant understanding of vocation, owing primarily to the influence of Martin Luther, his writings, and followers. There was a theology of vocation implicit in seminars flowing from the brief worship time led by Presbyterians for Presbyterians. However, there seems to be a tendency among participants to conflate their call as Christians with their call to ministry and frequently to a particular church. It stems from clergy using call as the PC (USA) term for an agreement to serve a particular church, “I received a call from First Presbyterian, Anytown,” and subsequently using the term loosely to refer to their calling to the ministry of word and sacrament. Such usage is understandable since the ordination process of the PC (USA) does depend on a particular congregation affirming one’s gifts for ministry by extending an offer of employment, a call to the prospective pastor. This gets particularly confusing when the specificity of either of those two uses gets conflated with the primary call of Jesus, to “come, follow me” (Mt 4:19, Mt 19:21, Mk 10:21, Lk 18:22). Since the same word call can be used in any of those three senses, along with others, the term is ripe for misunderstanding.

To address this, and help participants begin to disentangle these uses, the seminar began with a section titled “Envisioning.” This was intended to encourage participants to
begin to picture their own retirement from active ministry. More than a few participants have admitted to seminar leadership that they had heard and believed that retirement was unbiblical. This was often unquestioned. One individual reported this to me and when I asked his source, he quoted my former pastor Earl Palmer who had said from the pulpit of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle that retirement was unbiblical. To address such assumptions and begin to call to question other images such as “dying with our boots on,” a reading from Numbers 8:23-26\(^7\) was incorporated into the opening of the envisioning section. In this text, God instructs the Levites to cease serving in the temple at the age of 50. “This applies to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall begin to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting; and from the age of fifty years they shall retire from the duty of the service and serve no more” (Nm 8:24-5). The NRSV, New International Version (NIV) and New American Standard (NAS hereafter) all use the word retire. Since the concept of retirement is connected to a particular type of service or career, which is itself connected to or conflated with vocation, the seminar’s leadership sought a more explicit theology of call in retirement.

**Making Theology Explicit**

As noted above, during the 1990s and early 2000s, Rev. David Rich was working on seminar resources to better focus on the particular needs of clergy. This included having three booklets prepared and published by the Board of Pensions, one on the needs

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\(^{7}\) All Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.
of retired clergy, the second, a theological and sociological consideration of aging, and most significantly, an articulation of a theology of vocation for retirement. This explicit theology of vocation came to be after Jack Stotts, the president of Austin Theological Seminary, was warmly received when he addressed a pre-retirement seminar in Austin. David Rich then invited him to share some thoughts on a theological understanding of call and calling in retirement at the annual meeting of Retirement Planning Consultants and Regional Representatives, (the leadership of the seminars) who met in San Antonio in 1997. This was the basis of the capstone of the Board’s resources on retirement, Aging Well: Theological Reflections on the Call and Retirement, a 7,300 word monograph which was published by the Board of Pensions as a staple-bound booklet of twenty-seven pages. This served as the explicit theological grounding for the seminars and was a resource for all those involved in seminar leadership. The content of which will be discussed in the next two subsections.

Value and Limitations of Stotts’ Contribution

Stott’s article was both a personal reflection by someone who had recently entered retirement and was actively exploring its contours, and a thoughtful Reformed exposition on the doctrine of vocation. Stott usefully distinguished between God’s calling, “the

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9 Stotts, Aging Well.
ultimate context of our lives” and God’s call, “the penultimate context of our life.”

Further, he noted that “the phases of our lives are the immediate context of our responses to God’s calling,” pointing out that “retirement is one of those contexts, a particular configuration of life that opens up new possibilities.” His emphasis on the freedom provided by this context was encouraging and widening and a helpful challenge to many who were experiencing the narrowing of their worlds physically and relationally.

Stott’s booklet which was the initial theological resource for seminar leaders was organized in six chapters beginning with a distinction between calling and call in chapter one. “Calling” is grounded in the nature of God “whose very being includes calling,” and is the calling that invites us into relationship with God. “Calls,” on the other hand are “concrete and specific . . . locations for hearing and responding to God’s calling.”

Calling and call then are unpacked in more detail in chapters of their own. Chapter 2 asserts that calling is identified or named by those attentive to it and can be to “salvation . . . liberation, . . . reconciliation.” Calling “is comprehensive,” and is a calling “to be our true selves,” to “overcome brokenness,” it “respects our freedom,” it “ennobles each person who responds affirmatively,” it “affirms the world as good,” and is a calling to servanthood.” Chapter 3 on “Calls” is little over a page long and identifies “calls” as

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10 Ibid., 25.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 5.
13 Ibid., 6.
14 Ibid., 7.
15 Ibid., 8-13.
“structures of meaning, identity, attachment, contribution, and satisfaction” that we create, such as “ecclesiastical, political, economic, familial, etc.”\(^{16}\) It is through these structures that we respond to God calling in particular tasks or functions. Examples include “the call to be a teacher” in the “structures called education,” or “to be a political leader and to exercise one’s responsibility as a citizen in the structure called political.”\(^{17}\) These structures include the church and the possibility of being called to leadership within that structure; thus consistent with Luther’s expansion of calling to all Christians, one’s particular “call” may be within or outside the church. Chapter 4 “Retirement: Reconsidering One’s Call,” cautions ministers about the risk of equating “calling and ecclesiastical call” and in so doing “the subordinate or secondary call becomes what defines us, gives our lives meaning . . .” rather than God’s calling which is the primary identity in our lives. He acknowledges that this happens with other professionals as well, but the chapter’s only subheading is on “Calling and Ecclesiastical Call.”\(^{18}\) Chapter 5 addresses “What Constitutes a Good Retirement” and includes sections on selfhood, “From Paid to Volunteer,” “Enjoying God Forever,” “Filling Our Time,” and “Life at Leisure.”\(^{19}\) The sixth (and final) chapter is a short summary of the distinction between calling as “the ground of our life,” in which we are reminded that “In life and in death we belong to God,” and calls “as human constructions that God chooses to invite our


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 19-23.
response.”

One’s calling is constant, because God continues to be calling individuals, while a specific call may conclude in retirement, “it is a good retirement when we find different calls to respond to God’s calling.”

A shorter version of Stott’s booklet was also printed in Windows magazine, a publication of Austin Seminary with the title “What is Our Calling When We No Longer Have a Call?” At 2,352 words, it is less than a third of the length of the original, it was reprinted as pre-seminar reading and sent to each registered participant (from 1999 to current) and was referred to and discussed in the pre-retirement seminar at least briefly. It was also a focal point of discussion and a primary exercise in the Post Retirement Seminar allowing those in the midst of their retirement an opportunity for theological reflection on their current context.

Stotts distinguished between his use of calling and call. “Calling” is used to refer to “God’s comprehensive calling to us,” and is a more general term than “call” which is used to “denote specific locations [contexts] where we respond to God’s calling.” Even though Stotts uses non-clergy examples of a call: “a call may be to a certain type of activity such as a call to the professional ministry of the church or to be a physician or a public-school teacher,” his listing professional ministry first in that list makes it evident

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20 Stotts, Aging Well, 25.

21 Ibid., 25.

22 Jack L. Stotts, “What is Our Calling When We No Longer Have a Call?” Reprinted from Windows magazine, (Austin, TX: Winter 1999).

23 Jack L. Stotts, “What is our Calling When We No Longer Have a Call?” Pre-Seminar Assignment Packet: Growing into Tomorrow... Today (Philadelphia: Board of Pensions, 2019), 2.
that he is thinking primarily about pastors.\textsuperscript{24} Retirement is discussed as a “context for our selfhood” in which our spirits follow our bodies.\textsuperscript{25} “God is still calling us,” but now the challenge is to reprioritize how we respond to particular calls while remaining true to the general calling on our lives.\textsuperscript{26} “Our call is to respond to the ultimate calling of God, but now in a different context.”\textsuperscript{27} One challenge in this transition, especially for clergy and their spouses is finding an appropriate way to take part in the life of a congregation when they are no longer in their familiar leadership roles. Transitioning from paid to volunteer roles brings with it a healthy freedom. The freedom to use one’s gifts and abilities in a new context and to decline opportunities that are not of interest is one of the gifts of the freedom retirement brings. This transition is explored in terms of moving from usefulness to enjoyment, and opportunities for delight and growth are encouraged.

To be at leisure does not mean to abandon the values we have espoused previously. It is to put them in different forms. The criteria given by the Lordship of Christ continue, including concern for the world around us and near to us. We are not recipients of any call to self-indulgence. We are called to ask whether at retirement we continue to engage in practices that are expressive of the comprehensive love of God.\textsuperscript{28}

Calls and callings are revisited in summary with a reminder of the primary importance of God’s calling and how the contextual nature of retirement might change the specifics of how that calling is lived out, with an opportunity to explore new specific calls, but aware

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Stotts, “What is our Calling?” 2.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 4.
of the dynamic nature of God and our lives. Stotts closes with a reminder that we are “ongoing servants of the God who is always calling us.”

Stotts’ article and his related but larger monograph offered a substantive overview of the notion of vocation, but each also had significant limitations. Written by a retired seminary president, who had spent much of his professional life in the academy, the two documents were easily digested by soon-to-be-retired pastors, less so by their spouses, and were rarely understandable to those who had served the church in other capacities. The longer monograph was primarily a resource for seminar leadership, most of whom had seminary training. Though the shorter article was sent to every seminar participant to read beforehand, many found it challenging to understand. For example, while his discussion of freedom was insightful and liberating, a sentence like the following kept non-clergy from engaging the ideas: “Our freedom commingles our agency and our sense of having been provided for.”

Three of the most experienced seminar facilitators, all retired clergy, all with advanced degrees had noticed and commented to me that the article was feeling dated and was less accessible to the younger participants. These younger people in a pre-retirement seminar were in their fifties, which suggests the challenge would only get worse in the coming years as the anticipated age of participants would decrease and the participation of lay workers in the church would increase. Beyond Dr. Stotts’ erudite discourse, the monograph lacked specific content that was relevant to non-clergy, and it also lacked the

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29 Ibid., 5.

30 Stotts, Aging Well, 11.
emphasis on purpose and passion that have become common in more recent writing on calling in secular work and a focus on discipleship in more current Christian reflections.

The Need to Articulate a Fresh Theology of Call/Vocation in Retirement

Professor Stott’s contribution, in its several versions, has been included in the pre-seminar coursework for participants and has been an important orienting resource for the various staff and consultants who lead the seminars. However, as the Board seeks to grow the number of non-clergy employees in its plan, the number of laypeople, women, and single members in the seminar is bound to increase. To avoid disenfranchising this more diverse membership at the outset, a reworking of the theological basis of the seminar is in order.

In 1999, the responsibility for leading the pre-retirement seminar shifted from the Retirement Consultants to the Board’s Regional Representatives. While the consultants (usually couples) still presented some of the wholeness content, the Board staff took on the primary leadership. In 2001 and 2002 there were thirty-nine and thirty-five seminars conducted for 431 and 558 attendees respectively. The 2003 stats were mixed in with other offerings, but from 2004 to 2010 the Board hosted between twenty-seven and thirty-seven seminars per year. From 2011-2016 the average number of seminars per year was down to twenty-four. Comparing 2015-2016 to 2001-2002 shows more efficient scheduling from a staff perspective, with twenty-three seminars offered in both 2015 and 2016 with attendance of 532 and 515 respectively.

This decrease continues in 2017 and 2018 due to staffing attrition (one retirement and one reassignment of the two Education Specialists along with a change in leadership).
which caused the number of seminars to drop in 2017 to nineteen with 347 attendees, and in 2018 to only seventeen with 294 in attendance. This reduction was driven by a lack of staff availability along with a strategic decision to focus on making more content available online.

**Population of Seminar Participants Becoming More Diverse**

2017 was also a time of dramatic change at the Board of Pensions as the monolithic benefits plan in three parts (Medical, Death and Disability, and Pension) was unbundled to allow churches more flexibility in providing benefits to their staffs. This is apart from their installed pastors who are required to be enrolled in the full benefits plan. This flexibility resulted in growth in the number of people covered by the Board of Pensions for the first time since 1983. The average age of new enrollees in our medical plan is lower than that of the existing population of the plan from the previous year. Detailed analysis on plan changes on the demographic of plan members has yet to be completed.

The education team did not begin collecting race/ethnicity data on participants until 2019, so it is not possible to assess any changes in that aspect of diversity of participants, and while ages of members could theoretically be determined by cross-referencing each individual member (not spouse/invited guests) who was a seminar registrant, there is no precise and manageable way to access such data. Also, the Board is understandably careful with and sensitive about protecting personal information of plan members. The intention of the Board of Pensions to increase the number of church workers who are covered with some benefits is beginning to bear fruit. From 2017 to 20
2019 the number of clergy receiving benefits from the Board held steady at roughly 6,300, while lay people receiving benefits increased from roughly 5,500 to nearly 9,000. The total number of church workers (both lay and clergy) receiving benefits of some type increased over that same period from approximately 12,000 to 15,200.\textsuperscript{31} Thus, the pre-retirement seminar and its materials must be accessible and engaging for retiring church workers both clergy and non-clergy.

This project will address the ministry challenge of increasing numbers of retiring church workers considering what is likely to be a longer period of retirement than has been the norm in the past. Engaging an understanding of their ongoing calling by God will benefit the church, the world, and themselves. A more inclusive invitation to reflect on vocation—and the tools with which to do that—will make the pre-retirement seminar a more valuable experience for all church workers as they consider and prepare for their next stage in life.

\textsuperscript{31} Todd Ingves, Director of Information Management, Board of Pensions, email to author, November 11, 2019.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 2:
LITERATURE REVIEW

While a more careful look at God’s calling will be considered later, the early church—as evidenced by Paul’s references to a worker’s right to be paid (1 Tim 5:18) and specifically claiming the Lord’s authority that “those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Cor 9:14)—was concerned or at least aware of issues of vocation. By the Patristic period, the church had become institutionalized and the authority that came with official leadership in the church was considerable. Gregory of Nazianzus’ (c. 329-390) wrestling with his appointment to the priesthood and the episcopacy illuminates the gravity of such a calling and the perils of human agency in responding to it.

Theology of Vocation: Patristic and Reformation Perspectives

Beginning with the Patristic period grounds an understanding of vocation in the early church. Gregory of Nazianzus’ articulation of pastoral vocation, in his Defense of His Flight to Pontus, is an example of early Christian thought that has shaped the
church’s understanding of the priestly and pastoral role for centuries. This is followed by Gustaf Wingren’s landmark work on Martin Luther’s understanding of Christian calling and vocation. While John Calvin is the source of the Reformed theological tradition, Luther’s work is more seminal for Protestants in terms of articulating an understanding of all Christians being called in their baptism.

*Defense of His Flight to Pontus, Gregory of Nazianzus*

It would be hard to overestimate the impact Gregory of Nazianzus has had on the understanding of the role of the priesthood in particular or pastoral ministry in general for centuries of Christians. While he is rightly celebrated for his defense and explication of the Trinity, for which he is called “The Theologian” in the Eastern Church, his articulation of why he sought to avoid the call to be ordained into the priesthood is noteworthy for its parallel to the story of Jonah, and for how his initial avoidance of the call has become a kind of normative narrative for many who end up in ministry today.¹ But more importantly, Gregory’s account of the crushing responsibility of pastoral ministry, the challenge of meeting that responsibility, and the absolute requirement of personal integrity and spiritual maturity required for such a task have formed the understanding of generations of those who have considered the awesome responsibility that is pastoral ministry.

As the son of a bishop, Gregory was familiar with the weight of the authority of the priesthood and leadership in the church and ran from it. He saw the role of shepherd

as bearing the responsibility for the salvation of those in his flock. He wrote “to undertake the training of others before being sufficiently trained oneself . . . to practice ourselves in piety at the expense of others’ souls seems to me to be excessive folly or excessive rashness.” Being responsible for the salvation of others seems foreign to an individualistic modern American Protestant, but would be understandably frightening, especially in the fourth century imperial church. His lengthy comparison of the role of the pastor with the role of the physician illustrates both the esteem with which he and his contemporaries viewed the ministry and the daunting endeavor it represents. As Gary Neal Hansen notes “a physician of souls [is] an almost impossible task: the patients are infinitely varied and they actively hide their ailments from treatment.”

In his explanation of his initial avoidance of ordination, Gregory notes the two errors of direct disobedience and presumptuous eagerness for authority and mounted a defense of his actions before abandoning all such pretense for humble acquiescence before God and the calling placed on his life. In a time when the church was imbued with considerable authority, Gregory had seen many aspire to positions of church leadership out of ambition and hunger for power or money and wanted none of that. Yet his certainty of God’s voice in the actions of those who sought to install him is instructive.

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He clearly thought to deny that calling was tantamount to direct disobedience, even defiance of God.⁴

The primary contribution to the Christian understanding of the vocation of ministry is this weightiness of the calling and the importance of transformation (what Gregory termed “purification”).⁵ According to Brian Matz, this oration on the flight to Pontus “reveals that the chief aim of pastoral service is purification of oneself and others.”⁶ He wrote this oration after being ordained a priest (against his will)⁷, and so his focus was on God’s calling to religious service; a calling he takes very seriously. As Hansen points out:

The minister, as steward of God’s mysteries, the gospel, the Word, the Sacraments, is charged with helping others in the path to salvation. The minister has to be someone who has directly approached God and been transformed. That is the only way a minister has any real wisdom to offer in helping other people live into the life of transforming communion with God, which is the Christian’s calling.⁸

This emphasis on personal transformation is not unknown within Reformed Protestantism. For example, in the Great Awakening of the 1700s in the English colonies in North America. Gilbert Tennant’s sermon “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry” where he argued that theological orthodoxy was insufficient evidence of a divine call to

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⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Defence of His Flight to Pontus,” 226.
⁶ Ibid., 6.
One must also have “an experience of God brought about by a spiritual conversion” that included living “a Reformed life that [gives] evidence of the work of the spirit in practical piety.” Gregory’s confession of his own reluctance serves to remind one of the critical need to be transformed before seeking to help others in desperate need of transformation.

Gregory’s emphasis on an individual’s transformation is also echoed in Mark Labberton’s diagnosis of the lack of a similar transforming experience for the church. He writes that the contemporary “church has lost its way in the world,” by failing “to be and to do what is most central to the church’s identity and purpose: follow Jesus.” While Labberton’s work will be explored later in this chapter, it is worth noting that Gregory’s emphasis on God’s transforming work in individual lives has echoed through the history of the church and will be a key component of a theology of vocation in retirement. The primary limitation of Gregory’s *Flight to Pontus* for this ministry challenge of addressing a changing constituency in the seminars (aside from its relative obscurity) is the focus on clergy and their call. However, his assessment of the need for transformation for all who claim to be Christian makes this work relevant to all believers, especially those who have served the church.

Clergy who have spent much of their professional lives leading worship and managing religion run the risk of treating the sacred as commonplace. Fatigue from the

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10 Ibid., 27.

stress of such a demanding vocation can lead to a desire to escape the church and its
demands as one considers retirement. Gregory serves as a reminder of the clarion call of
God on our lives and chastens us not to avoid or ignore it as we consider the practical
aspects of life as our time of active employment comes to a close.

Luther on Vocation, Gustaf Wingren

Martin Luther’s (1483-1546) reaction against Catholic clericalism created the
context in which Luther expanded the concept of vocation to all baptized Christians,
rather than being the province merely of ecclesiastical concern. So while Calvin is the
source of the reformed theological tradition, Luther’s works provide a wider and deeper
corpus of literature addressing vocation. To access that corpus, Gustaf Wingren’s
“conscientious analysis”12 of Luther will be the guide. Karlfried Froehlich refers to
Wingren’s work as “the standard book on Luther’s thought” on vocation, but notes that
the English translator “rendered the Swedish title without referring to doctrine,” which
the original Swedish title does.13 Froehlich concludes that as Wingren set out to “describe
‘vocation’ in the context of Luther’s total theology; everything hangs together there”
which situates vocation in “a web of doctrine.”14 But Wingren’s description does not
include a brief summation of vocation. Luther’s contributions to the Church are many but

12 Alexander Miller, review of “Luther on Vocation, by Gustaf Wingren, Translated by Carl C.
14 Ibid.
wresting the concept of vocation from its narrow use as an ecclesiastical term and broadening it to refer to the calling of all Christians is among the most significant.

Wingren organizes Luther’s thought in terms of dualities. Beginning with earthly and heavenly kingdoms, he then unpacks a second duality in the struggle between God and the devil before finally focusing on humankind and our condition. Winter notes that “the organizing principle” of Wingren’s book is the “fundamental duality of stability and mobility, constraint and freedom.” Stability is provided by vocation, along with the law, and through them, God works “to sustain creation.” Acts of love and care for one’s neighbor are acts of vocation showing God’s love through human action. Mobility, in contrast to the constraint of the law, is provided by the gospel. Though the gospel orients us heavenward, the working out of the gospel in action toward our neighbor provides opportunities for God’s love to be enacted in the created order.

These dualities allow Wingren to pull from Luther’s works a variety of ideas related to vocation but without imposing his own summary. The closest Wingren comes to a summary of Luther’s doctrine of vocation is in preview in the introduction. “Man in his vocation is in the earthly kingdom hoping for the heavenly kingdom, which comes to him here through the gospel, but which will not be fully revealed in power until after death. Thus he stands between heaven and earth. But he also stands between God and the devil. His vocation is one of the situations in which he chooses sides in the combat

\[\text{\[15\] Gibson Winter, review of Luther on Vocation, by Gustaf Wingren, Carl Rasmussen,} \text{The Journal of Religion, 38, no. 2 (Apr. 1958): 139.}\]

\[\text{\[16\] Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\[17\] Ibid.}\]
between God and Satan.”\textsuperscript{18} Wingren shows Luther’s view of vocation as a context in which humans stand in tension between overarching powers of sin and sanctification, God and the Devil, heaven and earth. Thus vocation is the station, the \textit{beruf}, in which individuals can work out their role in these tensions.

For understanding the relevance of Luther’s doctrine of vocation broadly, perhaps the most helpful aspect is the idea of humankind’s cooperation with God. Wingren writes “co-operation takes place in vocation, which belongs on earth, not in heaven; it is pointed toward one’s neighbor, not toward God.”\textsuperscript{19} This is Luther’s next most salient contribution to the topic of vocation. That in cooperation with God, our work, our calling, need be beneficial to others. To be clear, Luther understands these works as important, but not salvific; they are focused on the kingdom of earth and have no bearing on the kingdom of heaven but they constitute our cooperation with God in the earthly struggle with the Devil. Wingren continues, “But while life on earth continues . . . our station or office, i.e. our vocation, is simply our mandate concerning the works man ought to do here in God’s earthly realm, while he awaits death. God has so constituted this vocation that, quite apart from man’s devoutness and love, \textit{others are served by vocation when it is fulfilled}” \textsuperscript{[emphasis mine].20}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 124.
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Wingren does connect the other-focus of vocation with baptism. Referring to it as “the church’s fundamental sacrament. In baptism the recipient is buried with Christ: he [sic] must die with him that he may rise and live with him (Rom 6).”

Vocation is discussed as a cross and a way for baptism to be fulfilled. “In one’s vocation there is a cross—for prince, husband, father, daughter, for everyone—and on this cross the old human nature is to be crucified. Here the side of baptism which is concerned with death is fulfilled.”

Luther’s treatise “The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism” makes this connection between baptism and death clear: “It follows, then, that baptism makes all sufferings, and especially death, profitable and helpful, so that they simply have to serve baptism in the doing of its work, that is, in the slaying of sin.”

Then, by his description of the various roles or “estates” people find themselves in, Luther ties baptism directly to vocation. “Therefore, God has instituted many estates in life in which men [sic] are to learn to exercise themselves and to suffer. To some he has commanded the estate of matrimony, to others the estate of the clergy, to others the estate of temporal rule, and to all he has commanded that they shall toil and labor to kill the flesh and accustom it to death.”

Because of our sinful nature, the work of sanctification—of dying to sin, is not complete in life. Baptism unites us in the death and resurrection of Christ and is only complete in our death. Wingren ties this rising and dying with Christ, back to the

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22 Ibid., 29.


neighbor. “To understand . . . the cross of vocation, we need only remember that vocation is ordained by God to benefit, not him who fulfils the vocation, but the neighbor who, standing alongside, bears his own cross for the sake of others.”

Luther’s baptismal theology leads directly to his developing theology of vocation, and it does so through his understanding of the priesthood of all believers. But before digging too deeply into baptism, remember that “Luther’s ‘doctrine’ of vocation . . . belonged in the context of his rejection of monasticism.” Luther was dismissive of monasticism as a higher calling, preferring to see God’s invitation to salvation as universal, requiring faith alone in the saving work of Christ. Luther attacked the monastic vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience, as "a most dangerous thing because it is without the authority and example of Scripture.”

Luther was not against the priesthood, but rather against seeing the religious as a better, higher, more holy life than that of an ordinary believer. We are all on level ground because of our unity with Christ that stems from our baptism. “For in baptism we all make one and the same vow: to slay sin and to become holy through the work and grace of God, to whom we yield and offer ourselves, as clay to the potter (Jer 18:416). In this no one is any better than another.” Luther acknowledges that “each man must test himself that he may know in what estate he may best slay sin and put a check upon his

25 Ibid., 29.

26 Froehlich, “Luther on Vocation,” 197.


Luther considers both marriage and chastity in the spiritual estate as viable options for how to live, but insists the choice should be based on which will offer an individual more suffering and toil to better prepare for death.

The primary limitation of Wingren’s work is that he assumes broad familiarity with the Luther corpus and most of his citations are to the German-language compilation of Luther’s works. While challenging yet rewarding, his analysis passes over some foundational aspects of Luther’s theology, specifically the centrality of Luther’s emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. Nevertheless, it serves as a one-volume analysis of vocation across the broad span of Luther’s writings.

In Luther’s *To the Christian Nobility*, he describes this two-level Christianity as the first of three walls to be torn down. Surprisingly, the priesthood of all believers is perhaps one of the most enduring ideas of the Reformation yet is often misunderstood. It is mentioned specifically in a baptismal context in 1 Peter 2:5 and asserted again in 1 Peter 2:9. Yet many Protestants, Presbyterians especially, are prone to shrugging off their own priestly roles as pastors and Christians. Yet Froehlich admonishes, “In tearing down this wall, Luther did not eliminate priests or do away with the priesthood. Instead he eliminated the laity! *All* are holy, *all* are spiritual and have a special call from God to faith and witness, the call to do whatever they do in church and society as priests of the

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29 Ibid.

30 Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility” LW 44:127.
Most High." More will be made of the priesthood of all believers and the sacralizing of ordinary work in chapter 3, drawing directly from Luther’s works.

Luther broadened the idea of a calling to include all secular work (not specifically seen as sin), which is of lasting significance, but a primary limitation of Luther’s work in a contemporary context is that it encourages one to stay in one’s place. This is problematic for a contemporary audience used to social mobility understandably dismisses Luther as simply justifying power structures and stations in life as God’s design. A contextual understanding of Luther in his time helps. People in the sixteenth century were generally raised by their parents within a social status and often trained by them in their trade or an occupation with little occasion to rise above that status. It is worth noting that both Luther and Calvin chose different kinds of work than their parents and occupations other than their parents wanted for them. They were evidently more open to social mobility than a selective reading of their writings would indicate.

According to R. Paul Stevens, unlike Calvin who encouraged staying in one’s station as a means of keeping order in society, Luther sought to “encourage a life of loving service.” This perspective does emphasize servanthood in all undertakings. One can affirm that work benefitting others can be treated as a calling and orient their service as part of their life of faith without feeling compelled to remain in whatever role it may be. God may indeed call one to a variety of roles consistent with skills, abilities, giftedness and the needs of others. The primary contributions from Wingren’s distillation

31 Froehlich, “Luther on Vocation,” 201.
of Luther for a theology of vocation in retirement are the sacralizing of ordinary work, the importance of one’s work benefitting one’s neighbor, and baptism as the grounding of our general calling as Christians and vocation as a context in which our baptismal identification with Christ is honed as a cross we bear preparing us for our baptism being completed in death.

**Denominational Perspective on Call/Vocation**

The Reformed Theological tradition is formalized for the PC (USA) in the *Book of Confessions*, and the idea of vocation is woven therein, perhaps most concisely in the “Westminster Shorter Catechism” which begins by asserting that the primary purpose of humankind is to know and enjoy God forever. The *Book of Order*, on the other hand, is the formal polity document of the PC (USA), and represents the formal practical repository of the Reformed tradition as it has been codified in my home denomination. While the *Book of Confessions* is the first half of the Constitution of the PC (USA) and the theological compilation of God’s people making theological statements in specific historical contexts, they do not address vocation as clearly as does the *Book of Order*. The *Book of Order* is the second half of the Constitution of the PC (USA) and attempts to embody the Reformed theology of the Confessions and applies it to vocation with more specificity than do the Confessions themselves. It represents the normative guidance and

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structure for how Presbyterians are to order themselves in matters of faith and practice, and thus represents how the theology is actually lived out, at least formally.

_The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II: The Book of Order, Office of the General Assembly_

The Book of Order addresses vocation directly or indirectly in three of its four parts. (The parts consist of The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, Form of Government, Directory for Worship, and Rules of Discipline.) Initially, vocation is alluded to in Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, Chapter Three: Principles of Order and Government under Officers, and Ordination by Council. Officers are appointed by Christ for the edification of the visible church through preaching, sacraments and discipline to preserve its truth and duty. These officers (Ruling Elders, Ministers of the Word and Sacrament and Deacons) are ordained only by the authority of a council. While not a formal explication of vocation, this treatment of the structure and order of the church does contribute to an understanding of how both lay and clergy share leadership of the church.

Vocation is covered in a little more detail in the first part, the Form of Government, under the section Ministers of the Word and Sacrament where the title is defined and the roles of teaching and pastoral care are articulated. The process of Preparation for Ministry with the logistics of time requirements, steps in the process, and oversight leads to the sections on Ordination and Call and Installation, which lay out how
one’s sense of calling is reified and institutionalized in the structure of the church.\textsuperscript{37}

These subsections contribute to a focus on vocation in providing a proper process for placing clergy into formal ecclesial contexts. The limitation of both of the above subsections in terms of this project is their limited focus on life within the church, especially its leadership. Of course, that is their intent in context, but for the sake of the Board’s pre-retirement seminar, the theology of vocation in retirement needs to look beyond clergy.

An important component for a theology of vocation is finally articulated in the Directory for Worship and provides a unique contribution to this project and the church. It can be found most clearly in the subsection Grace and Gratitude under chapter one: The Theology of Christian Worship: An Introduction.\textsuperscript{38} The Reformed principle of God’s initiation and our response is described, then summarized: “This rhythm of divine action and human response—found throughout Scripture, human history, and everyday events—shapes all of Christian faith, life, and worship.”\textsuperscript{39} This responsiveness to God’s grace is then applied to the life of an individual believer providing the definitive summation of Christian Vocation in the subsection so titled.\textsuperscript{40}

We respond to God’s grace through our Christian vocation. In Baptism we offer our whole lives in service to God, and are empowered by the Holy Spirit with gifts for ministry in Jesus’ name. Therefore we are called to honor and serve God at all times and in all places: in our work and play, in our thought and action, and in our private and public engagements. Such service and love is an act of gratitude

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., G-2.06—G-2.0610, G-2.07, G-2.08.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., W-1.0102

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., W-5.0105.
for God’s grace. This has been a particularly important theme of the Reformed tradition: the life and work of every Christian can and should give glory to God. As we honor and serve God in our daily life and labor, we worship God. Whatever our situation, we have opportunities each day to bear witness to the power of God at work within us. Therefore, for Christians, worship, work, and witness cannot be separated.

The contribution of the *Book of Order* to this project is that it provides, in one short text, a concise Reformed understanding of vocation in trinitarian perspective which is summarized as being grounded in baptism, and our response in gratitude to God’s grace by offering our “whole lives in service to God . . . empowered by the Holy Spirit.” Its primary limitation as a guide for worship and for life, alas, is its unfamiliarity to many in the church. This presents Christian education challenges to pastors who want to form disciples in the Reformed tradition. But as a foundational document for the Presbyterian Church (USA), this articulation of Christian vocation is a concise but expansive distillation of the Reformed tradition.

Vocation is integral to the Reformed tradition and is woven throughout the constitution of the PC (USA). In the *Book of Order* it is introduced or alluded to in the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, expanded in the Form of Government, and twice articulated in the Directory for Worship; it is only omitted in the Rules of Discipline. Following Calvin, who “perceived the close relation between *Soli Deo Gloria* and the Christian life,” the *Book of Order* echoes the Reformed Tradition, found in the *Book of Confessions*, captured so succinctly in the beginning of the Westminster Shorter

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41 Ibid.

Catechism and paraphrased at the beginning of this section, “What is the chief end of man[sic]? Man’s[sic] chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

**Contemporary Perspectives on Retirement and Call in Retirement**

Having considered two important historical perspectives, plus the present polity of the PC(USA) on vocation, this paper turns now to contemporary authors on the topic. Mark Labberton writes about calling as a current crisis in the church. Gwen Halaas writes about clergy preparing to retire from the perspective of a spouse of a clergyperson and a medical doctor. Paul Stevens, a seminary professor who has written about vocation from the perspective of a practical theologian considers aging and retirement and the importance of calling in later life. Finally, Walter Wright, a former seminary president, who was mentored for 30 years by a noted businessman, writes to a general audience from his own deeply personal experience wrestling with the transition from career to retirement.

*Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today*, Mark Labberton

Mark Labberton, is remarkably well-suited to reflect on issues of vocation. The book is written for a general audience, but as the President of Fuller Seminary, Labberton is deeply aware of clergy issues, and as a longtime pastor, he is deeply aware of issues of vocation and calling for laity. Moreover, as a longtime friend and associate of the late Rev. Dr. John Stott and serving on the board of International Justice Mission, he has an

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abiding concern for the global church, and is actively interested in its welfare and struggles.

As suggested in the title, Labberton insists the primary calling of all Christians is to follow Jesus with integrity. The crisis of the church is that so few of us are doing so. In chapters titled “Relocating,” Reorienting,” and “Refocusing,” Labberton addresses issues of context and process. Focusing in succession on where, how, and to whom and what we are called. But he continues to come back to the question of how we are individually and corporately following Jesus.

Grounding our identity as beloved and identifying God’s wisdom as part of how we are to live out that identity, Labberton notes that “In biblical terms, wisdom leads people to acts of courage in places of need.” Of course, going into places of need does require courage, for in such places there is often suffering. “Seeking a call that evades suffering is a decision neither to follow Jesus nor to live in the real world.” Only in the final chapter does Labberton address the presenting question: “So, What Does God Call Me to Do?” Admitting that many readers may have expected this to be the subject of each chapter in some way, Labberton explains “In the end, call is about continuous formation into the likeness of Jesus Christ far more than it is about finding direction or getting a job.”

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44 Labberton, Called, 119.
45 Ibid., 126.
46 Ibid., 135.
47 Ibid., 135.
This emphasis on a transforming discipleship is the hallmark of this work. Labberton is aware of the counter-cultural nature of his approach. Two of his previous titles both begin with the phrase “The Dangerous Act of” (first “of worship” and later “of loving your neighbor”) because the biblical insight he brings to bear on worship, loving one’s neighbor, and living out one’s calling are bound to be dangerous, transformative, and ultimately redemptive.\(^\text{48}\) The key contributions to the construction of a theology of call in retirement are the simple but profound focus on following Jesus, and the expansion of that simple invitation of Jesus in the Gospels into a more Pauline understanding of ongoing transformation into the image of the one we are following.

*Clergy, Retirement and Wholeness: Looking Forward to the Third Age*, Gwen Halaas

Gwen Wegstrom Halaas serves as an academic dean in a medical school, a director of Ministerial Health and Wellness Project for the ELCA and is president and CEO of PatientWise, a patient recruitment corporation for medical trials. She has authored two significant books on clergy health and well-being, this one focusing on preparing for and transitioning into retirement. She brings the sympathetic eye of the spouse of a pastor, the warmth and clinical expertise of a family physician, and the research-based orientation of a medical school faculty member to bear on this important transition. Beginning with a look at health and wellness in mid-life, noting the reality of change she then moves to look at health holistically with a chapter each on physical,

emotional, intellectual, social, vocational, and spiritual health, concluding with a chapter on dying well. This work has been a central resource as background for those presenting the Board of Pensions’ Pre-Retirement seminar since its publication in 2005. Her insights on social health and vocational health are especially valuable.

“God Happens at Parties” is the title of the chapter on social health. Halaas notes simply that many pastors are not very good at developing or maintaining a social network during their ministry because of, in her estimation, all the demands on their time. (The source of the problem goes deeper than mere busy-ness but this issue is beyond the scope of this work). Halaas cites research on the health risks of isolation and loneliness, she addresses the challenges behind, and the need for pastors to conscientiously work on, developing friendships and social networks. Her straightforward prescription: clergy need to develop social networks outside the church they are currently serving and they need to do so before they retire.

The brief chapter on vocational health, titled “Follow Your Passion,” illustrated with anecdotes and examples from her work, offers encouragement for those in middle age to take inventory of their lives. “We may know that we are in a vocation in which we can make a significant difference, but we may be losing energy because something is missing for our own growth or sustenance.” Tying passion to the health of one’s heart, Halaas describes “vital exhaustion” defined by the Institute of Medicine as “Excessive

49 Gwen Wagstrom Halaas, Clergy, Retirement, and Wholeness: Looking Forward to the Third Age (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005), 69.
50 Ibid., 70.
51 Ibid., 86.
fatigue, increased irritability, and demoralization” as a contributor to heart disease.

Striving to balance a career of concern for others with an appropriate focus on self-care is critical for wholeness and well-being.

Especially helpful in crafting a theology of vocation is Halaas’ holistic approach. Dividing health into physical, emotional, intellectual, social, vocational and spiritual components is a useful framework, though it will need to be married to a biblical perspective, which we will see in the next book considered. A second piece which we will also consider in more detail comes from her medical perspective on faith and health.

Noting the work of Gary Harbaugh in describing the concept of “faith-hardiness” as a “resilience to stress and trauma,” Halaas’ concludes, “We are less likely to experience lasting fear or anxiety, less likely to feel depressed or hopeless when we are in active conversation and in daily relationship with God.” This simple observation will be elaborated upon by others and incorporated into a theology of call in retirement.

_Aging Matters: Finding Your Calling for the Rest of our Life, R. Paul Stevens_

R. Paul Stevens is an emeritus professor of marketplace theology and leadership at Regent College in Vancouver, B.C. He has written extensively on vocation including

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52 Ibid., 87-8.

53 Halaas, _Clergy, Retirement, and Wholeness_, 5.


55 Halaas, _Clergy, Retirement, and Wholeness_ 93.
In Aging Matters, as the subtitle suggests, the focus is on finding one’s calling after retirement. In three parts: Calling, Spirituality, and Legacy, Stevens lays out a case for the importance of calling in later life, walks the reader through aging as a spiritual journey with pitfalls and vistas, and explores the importance of leaving a legacy.

The second section on spirituality begins with a chapter on “Aging as a Spiritual Journey” in which Stevens illustrates opportunities to deepen one’s faith as one wrestles with priorities and significance. Drawing from psychology and spirituality, midlife transitions are seen as spiritual opportunities with invitations to go deeper with God. This section is particularly engaging for those in the “sandwich generation” who are caring for aging parents while anticipating retirement themselves because of the cautionary chapter on “The Vices of Aging” and its companion chapter on “The Virtues of Late Life.”

The vices are structured around the seven deadly sins applied to the aging process. “One form of pride in the older person is the refusal to learn and the refusal to take instruction.” Steven’s discussion of wrath as the “burning desire to control” begins with a passage from Paul Tournier describing old people as one of two kinds:

There are wonderful old people, kind, sociable, radiant with peace . . . . They are grateful, even astonished, that things are done for them, and that they are still loved. They read, they improve their minds, they go for quiet walks, they are interested in everything, and are prepared to listen to anyone. And then there are awful old people, selfish, demanding, domineering, bitter. They are always

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57 R. Paul Stevens, Aging Matters: Finding Your Calling for the Rest of Your Life (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 84 and 100.

58 Ibid., 87.
grumbling and criticizing everybody. If you go and see them, they upbraid you for not having come sooner.59

The virtues are structured around the traditional four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude and additionally faith, hope, and love and how they work themselves out in the aging person. The value of hope is exemplary. “Hope enables us to invest in the next generation and in projects that will outlast our lifetime. It enables us with Simeon and David to die in peace. It assures us that even our difficulties in this life . . . are . . . preparing us for a greater life.”60 These examples of vices and virtues allow the reader touchpoints in their experience with their own parents/grandparents highlighting those aspects of our own character to nurture and encourage or work to amend while there is still time, with God’s help to make some headway.

Stevens provides an inductive Bible study along with questions for discussion at the end of each chapter. While they can be engaged alone, the opportunity to gather a small group to explore the contours of aging together should not be missed. Whether gathering a book group or a discussion group on aging for whom the book could be an initial resource or introducing it to an existing group such as an adult Sunday School class for a topical study, there is value in creating a context of community to discuss calling.61


60 Stevens, Aging Matters, 107.

61 Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore eds. Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life’s Seasons (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 11.
Especially helpful in crafting a theology of vocation is Stevens’ reminder of a biblical view of the interdependent connection of body and soul.  

This is the theological basis for seeking a holistic approach to aging and retirement that Halaas and others promote. Another helpful piece is Stevens’ premise that we should work, paid or not, in some form until death. In his opening chapter on reframing retirement, Stevens offers seven reasons in support. “First, we are made to work . . . . Second, work is good for the world . . . . Third, work is good for us . . . . Fourth, work is a practical way of loving our neighbor . . . . Fifth, work participates in the spreading of the kingdom of God . . . . Sixth, work is the main context in which we grow spiritually . . . . Finally, work prepares us for he life to come.”

Unpacking the biblical and theological rationales he provides for each assertion will provide useful material in building a theology of vocation in retirement.

*The Third Third of Life: Preparing for Your Future*, Walter C. Wright

While Walter Wright is theologically trained, and a former seminary president, the unique contribution of *The Third Third of Life* is that it is grounded in a twenty-five-year mentoring relationship with a businessman. Max DePree, former CEO of Herman Miller furniture, and a celebrated author on leadership had engaged in a years-long intentional conversation with Wright about Wright’s own retirement. The fruit of that conversation is captured in a remarkable book in which many questions are posed and few answers are given. Each chapter ends with a personal reflection by a different

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62 Stevens, *Aging Matters*, 166.

63 Ibid., 20-25.
contributor, none of them ministers (though two got some seminary training along the way).

It is intended and designed as a study guide and the discussion questions at the end of each chapter can provide for a worthwhile experience if engaged. Better yet, they can be engaged with a group who have gathered to consider together what life’s journey might hold for them in their own third third. There is a brief but helpful set of facilitator notes at the end of the book addressing practical matters of gathering and leading such a group.

Divided into eight sessions with an introduction, reflection (from different contributors), and a reading to cement the ideas introduced, Wright addresses transitioning out of midlife and career; fears, hopes and dreams; renewed calling; family and roots; generativity; and spirituality. The treatment of family and generativity are particularly winsome and challenging. In the chapter on family, Wright invites the reader to assess his or her relationship with each family member and then asks: “What does each family member need from you? [And] What does he or she want from you?” are excellent prompts to consider intentionally the impact on and possibilities for those closest to you as you prepare to retire. Challenges of finances are also addressed as a source of stress for families. The chapter on generativity begins with a compelling

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64 Walter C. Wright. The Third Third of Life: Preparing for Your Future (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 79.
reflection by a successful entrepreneur who finally realized how unfair and systemic poverty is and how his experience could help make a difference for many.\textsuperscript{65}

Wright argues persuasively for the importance of small groups in meeting our needs for intimacy in a culture fraught with isolation. Forming a small group to explore and consider the idea of calling, especially prior to times of life-stage transitions, could prove remarkably valuable. Such groups could become a “community of calling,” providing the discernment and voice so often lacking.\textsuperscript{66} While deeply Christian in its perspective, it is not addressed to clergy and its structure (the reflections by others, discussion questions) and encouragement to gather a group to share in the journey of exploring the third third of life make this a remarkably valuable resource.


\textsuperscript{66} Cahalan, “Finding Life’s Purposes in God’s Purposes,” in \textit{Calling All Years Good}, 11.
CHAPTER 3:

THEOLOGY OF THE NEW MINISTRY INITIATIVE

The heart of the Fuller Doctor of Ministry program is cultivating “reflective practitioners” who are “actively engaged in the ministry of the church” and reflect theologically on “their ministry practices.”¹ The ministry context for this project is not a congregation but rather those serving congregations, many of whom are ordained as Elders, Deacons, or Ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and have implicit as well as explicit theologies of call which are informing their own preparation for retirement. Robert Schreiter notes such times of transition invite theological reflection for congregations, and the same is true of the individuals that serve them.² Schreiter also argues “no matter what the challenge confronting the congregation, its theological stance must be made explicit and accessible so as not to be superseded by pragmatic or


utilitarian strategies.” This would be true for individuals as well, especially those who serve the church.

Theology of Vocation as Responding to God’s Call

In order to consider whether one has a vocation in retirement, one must first decide what is meant by vocation, and then consider that in light of the authoritative norm for the community, one’s tradition, and current context. This chapter will present a theology of vocation that is biblically-grounded, informed by the Protestant theological tradition, and considered in light of age and stage of life and the cultural context of North America.

Biblical Examples

The Bible is replete with accounts of God calling people to do particular things or fill particular roles. God is able to work God’s will in and through whomever God wants: from the unlikely and ill-equipped (Amos, the fig-picker from the southern Kingdom of Judah, called to issue prophetic judgment upon the northern kingdom of Israel), to the young and inexperienced (Samuel, to whom God gives an unpleasant message to deliver to his priestly mentor). God included the well-respected but apparently wrongly-gendered, too (Deborah, the judge in a civic and judicial role of leadership, who ended up in a role of military leadership when Barak had a crisis of confidence). This section will consider three familiar and paradigmatic call stories, two from the New Testament and

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3 Ibid., 25.
one from the Hebrew Scriptures, drawn as examples of God’s call on people of different ages: Mary in adolescence; Saul of Tarsus in middle age; and Abram and Sarai in later adulthood.

**The Calling of Mary**

Found in the first chapter of Luke’s gospel, the calling of Mary to bear the Son of God into the world is a story of God’s clear communication (via an angel, literally “messenger” in the Greek) about God’s intention. It comes woven together with another angelic annunciation, which is a call story of sorts as well: the story of God’s announcement to Zechariah and Elizabeth that they would bear a son into a prophetic role. The two stories are interwoven, and perhaps the most interesting aspect of the stories is the contrast in responses to the same heavenly messenger. Zechariah, an elderly priest serving in the temple is a figure worthy of respect both for his role and his age, as well as his righteousness. The announcement of the angel that he would be blessed with a son is stunningly good news for him, his wife, his security and standing in the community. Yet his response of surprise to the presence of the angel and the message of his wife’s impending pregnancy is overshadowed by his doubt, which results in a sanction—muteness until his son is delivered as promised (Lk 1:20).

In contrast, Mary is young, female, unwed, and so in a position of no status or authority in the culture. The announcement of her impending pregnancy comes at great

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personal cost, risking her status as betrothed, her character, her family relationships, and potentially worse. Yet her response to her angelic visitation is understandable, beginning with surprise and confusion, but concludes with simple assent: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). Of the many reasons Mary is held in high regard, her simple assent and obedience to God’s call on her life may be the most instructive. On one hand, her role is supremely important to God’s plan of salvation for humankind, yet on the other, her assent to God’s choice is lived out in the purely ordinary role of mothering.

Whenever in life one has a clear calling from God, be it adolescence or older adulthood, the living it out may be done in purely ordinary fashion, but the significance may be beyond our understanding. The actions of faithful parenting, especially the interaction between mother and child could hardly be more ordinary, but as illustrated by Theotokos, (literally the “mother of God”—the popular label for Mary in the fourth century) such ordinary actions can have extraordinary significance. The experience of Zechariah should also serve as a cautionary exemplar of the older, experienced clergy person who, hardened by disappointment or years of experience, comes to doubt God despite God’s clear voice from an evident messenger. Mary should serve as a model: she is open to God’s call in and on her life, and her response is simple assent beginning with the familiar Hebrew idiom “Here I am” (Lk 1:38).

**The Calling of Paul**

Paul is the exemplar for dramatic conversions. His calling represented a complete redirection of his life’s trajectory, coming at the height of his power and authority. While
not a priest, he was equipped with credentials from the High Priest in Jerusalem to carry out the persecution of the new movement that would come to be called Christian. To get Saul’s attention, God had to blind him, knock him down, speak directly to him, then send a human messenger to restore his sight and give him further instruction. Sometimes the most zealous require the strongest intervention to get back on track.

The conversion experience of Saul of Tarsus, however, is not paradigmatic of conversions in the New Testament. Even in the book of Acts, Luke includes Saul’s conversion in a series of examples of conversions moving out from Jerusalem and the Jewish community into Samaria, and beyond. It is however a story of calling both to a general role and a particular task. The general role, of course, is to respond to Jesus (and stop persecuting him and his followers); while the particular role will be to proclaim Jesus as Lord as an apostle to the gentiles. Despite the dramatic nature of his experience, Paul represents an important bridge for current Christians. While Jesus’ calling of his disciples recounted in the gospels are significant, costly, life-changing events for each, Christians today do not have the immediacy of such an interaction with a living person. Paul, on the other hand, had to change the course of his life based on a dramatic vision/experience and the testimony of others.

While Acts 9:1-19 is the most familiar account of Paul’s conversion, it is but one of three Luke includes in his history of the early church. Paul’s defense before the council in Acts 22 and his defense before Agrippa in Acts 25-26 provide Luke the opportunity to emphasize different aspects of the event as Paul interprets his own experience and how it fits into the Jewish tradition for a Jewish audience (the Council) and a skeptical Roman
gentile (Agrippa). The theme of Paul’s account to the council, his fellow Jews, is that of calling. Reflecting on this passage, Will Willimon observes, “Our ‘vocation’ as Christians, the story suggests, is not something we merely ‘do for a living,’ but rather the way in which we respond to the commission of God upon our lives, the things God asks us to do as part of God’s work in the world.”

For those who serve the church, that work can and should be seen as a living out of that calling in one’s vocation. But when that paid vocation ends in one way or another, the calling of God and the need for the Christian to remain engaged in God’s work in the world does not.

In Paul’s defense before Agrippa, he narrates (with some additional material and elaboration) the story already told in Acts 9 and 22, until verse 12. Paul narrates the encounter with the risen Jesus in a vision and includes more detail on this commission: “for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and to bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles—to whom I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light” (Acts 26:16-18). Paul is to be a servant and bear witness, appointed and commissioned to take the gospel beyond the Jews to the broader world.

God took Saul’s evident giftedness and passion, leveraging his credentials and status as a Pharisee, and turned them into assets to be used for the growth and health of the very movement Saul had been persecuting. As Luke points out at the stoning of

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Stephen where Saul watched with approval, and at Saul’s aggressive persecution of the church in Jerusalem, the result was that all but the apostles were scattered and “those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. (Acts 8:4). As Willimon notes, “God is able to use even persecution of his own people to work his purposes.”7 While not specifically about the calling of Saul, it does illustrate that even those apparently opposed to God’s work are not beyond God’s use.

For developing a theology of vocation, this suggests that in God’s economy, nothing is wasted. God is able to make use of one’s past in all its variety, both good and bad, and redeem it for the sake of the kingdom. While Paul’s conversion is unusual, his calling, especially to the particular task of being an ambassador of Christ to the gentiles is exemplary of God’s ability to get someone’s attention and then direct (or redirect) their gifts and abilities in a way that will have maximum impact for God’s kingdom.

**The Calling of Abram and Sarai**

The calling of Abram and Sarai is a paradigmatic story of God’s calling interrupting the life of individuals. The narrative sprawls across twelve chapters of Genesis from the genealogy linking Abram to the descendants of Noah in chapter 11 through the end of chapter 23 with Sarah’s death. Beginning with God’s call to leave, God asks Abram to go to a land he would be shown, in order for God to make a nation of him, in order for God to bless the world.

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I

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will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; (Genesis 12:1-4a)

The simple act of Abram’s listening to God, even in the ongoing disappointment of his and Sarai’s childlessness, and their willingness to uproot their prosperous and comfortable household are all elements of their call that should resonate—perhaps uncomfortably—with those nearing retirement. There is another element here that seems especially significant to pastors. The call to leave. Leaving their evident success to make a nation is a call to legacy-building, when the natural desire might well be to bask in the context of their recent work.

Walter Brueggemann notes, “This text is pivotal in Genesis. It links the traditions of God’s providential care for the world and God’s electing call of Israel. It also presents a primary model for the promise-making word of God, which begins the history of Israel and the responding faith of Israel.”® Abram’s simple response of obedience is noted in chapter 11 of Hebrews as the paradigmatic response of faith. “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called” (Heb 11:8, 11:9, 11:11). Abraham and Sarah’s faith passed down through generations “By faith Abraham . . .” (Heb 11:17, “By faith Isaac . . .” (Heb 11:20), “By faith Jacob . . .” (Heb 11:21), “By faith Joseph . . .” (Heb 11:22). The faithfulness of Abram and Sarai’s obedient response changes their identity as God gives them new names (Gen 17). “A name change . . . makes a new stage in his identification

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with the divine purpose. He must now live up to his new name."⁹ Abraham and Sarah’s faithfulness is caught by their offspring through three generations who would be called patriarchs, and ultimately God’s people Israel, and God’s people the church.

God’s promise to Abram that he would be a great nation and a blessing to others depended on God’s promise of land (Gen 12:7, 13:4-15, 17:8), and an heir (Gen 12:7, 13:16, 15:1-6), which in the context of the couples’ barrenness provided cause for doubt (Gen 15:1-3, 17:15-18) and creative over-functioning with Hagar producing Ishmael (Gen 16 and 17:18). It was also a promise that, after it was fulfilled in the birth of Isaac, was immediately brought under threat through God’s testing of Abraham in the Akedah (binding in Hebrew, Gen 22). Testing or suffering is a second paradigmatic element in the faith of the Patriarchs celebrated in Hebrews 11.¹⁰ Isaac losing his sight, Jacob losing his strength and vitality and Joseph losing everything, all without getting to the promised land, but maintaining their trust in God’s faithfulness.

There is much to mine from the calling of Abraham and Sarah. God’s call to one is a call to both. However, God’s call to Abram was negotiated within their marriage and cultural context, the call of one impacts both. In all its wonderful narrative complexity and repetition of God’s promise, the story of this aged, barren couple who left their home and familiar surroundings because of God’s call on their lives is a clarion reminder to

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those facing retirement and a change in vocation that God is not finished with them yet. If God has something particular God wants from a person, a calling to God’s work in the world, the question will not be one of awareness of what God is calling one to do, but rather the concern will simply be one of obedience.

From these limited but important exemplars of call in the Christian Scriptures, one can summarize some important take-aways for the construction of a theology of vocation for retirement. God is a God who calls. God speaks creation into being in the early pages of Genesis, and then interacts with individuals. God calls to Abram in his old age and Abram hears God. God calls to Saul in the midst of Saul’s murderous rage and righteous indignation, and Saul hears God. God speaks to Mary (and in Matthew’s account to Joseph) and invites her to bear a child. Mary hears God and obeys despite the enormity of the request and, for her, it is tremendously inconvenient timing.

God’s calling can have a disruptive impact on one’s life. Abram and Sarai uprooted their household and moved. Saul had a complete reversal of heart and action toward the movement called “the Way” (Acts 9:2). Mary’s tidy betrothal to Joseph had to endure the suspicion and likely contempt of neighbors and Joseph’s own decision to “dismiss her quietly” (Mt 1:19). Each example is instructive of the importance of trust and perhaps obedience. Trust may not be evident to an outside observer but is marked by a quality of relationship with the one whom is trusted. Obedience may take the form of ordinary action, but faithful action that can yield extraordinary outcomes. God does not waste experiences, even the regrettable zeal with which Saul persecuted the church can be turned by God into zeal in apostleship to the church.
Vocation in Historic Theology and Contemporary Practice

This question of obedience to God’s call leads back to the Patristic period of the early church. Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the clearest examples of wrestling with God’s call on one’s life, can be an important grounding point for those who have served the church, whether as clergy or lay people, and after a career in such service are contemplating what God has in store for them next. While Gregory’s education, gifts, and abilities ultimately led to his appointment and consecration as Archbishop of Constantinople in 380, only eighteen years prior he was ordained to the priesthood under duress. He resisted ordination, at least in part due to a concern for his own spiritual inadequacy. One of the most prevalent themes in Gregory’s preaching is transformation, (katharsis in the Greek) which is usually translated as “purification;” the term occurs nearly four hundred times throughout his orations and “plays a substantial role” in his pastoral theology.\(^\text{11}\)

Gregory’s ordination by force, is a reminder that sometimes roles are indeed thrust upon us. Left to his own preferences and disposition, Gregory would have remained in the contemplative life of a monastic, but his father had him ordained a priest (and later consecrated as bishop).\(^\text{12}\) However, his contributions to the church, chiefly a robust doctrine of the Trinity, and an abiding concern for the transformation of the individual believer and the priest or pastor as well, have rung through the ages in his sermons and other writings.

\(^{11}\) Matz, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 5.

Likewise, God is not finished with humanity yet, and may have more in store for God’s children than any have dared to consider or even imagine and may not have the same plans for the next season of our lives as we do ourselves. Even as employees anticipate a change in status from active clergy or paid church staff to retirement or whatever is next, it must continue to include a transforming relationship with God. Those suffering from burn-out after years of serving the church need to seek healing and restoration, but that might not lead to a life of leisure and respite. Gregory’s famous defense of his flight from the ministry to the seclusion and monastic calm of Pontus was for centuries a classic explication of ministry and why it is something to undertake only for those who have been and are continuing to be transformed by their relationship with the living God.

Who, in fine, is the man who, although he has never applied himself to, nor learnt to speak, the hidden wisdom of God in a mystery, although he is still a babe, still fed with milk, still of those who are not numbered in Israel, nor enrolled in the army of God, although he is not yet able to take up the Cross of Christ like a man, although he is possibly not yet one of the more honorable members, yet will joyfully and eagerly accept his appointment as head of the fulness [sic] of Christ? No one, if he will listen to my judgment and accept my advice! This is of all things most to be feared, this is the extremest of dangers in the eyes of everyone who understands the magnitude of success, the utter ruin of failure.  

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Gregory reminds us of the tremendous stakes involved in our own transforming relationship with God as well as simply hearing and responding to (or not responding to) the call of God. As summarized by Hansen, “Only if you stay near to God can you guide

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others near to God.” Gregory modeled this in his own life. When he was not being pressed into service as a bishop, one responsible for the spiritual care and nurture of others, he continued his monastic call of drawing near to God to be continuously transformed himself.

Martin Luther’s contribution to an understanding of vocation was to wrest the idea from a purely ecclesial usage, where only clergy and religious (monastic) occupations were described or even understood as being roles to which one could be called by God. Luther’s reaction to monasticism made vocation a doctrine that was woven throughout his larger theological project. A good place to begin in understanding Luther’s understanding of vocation in his own words, is his Open Letter to the Christian Nobility . . . Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate.

It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are to be called the “spiritual estate”; princes, lords, artisans, and farmers the “temporal estate.” That is indeed a fine bit of lying and hypocrisy . . . all Christian are truly of the “spiritual estate,” and there is among them no difference at all but that of office, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:12: We are all one body, yet every member has its own work, whereby it serves every other, all because we have on baptism, one Gospel, one faith, and are all alike Christians; for baptism, Gospel and faith alone make us “spiritual” and a Christian people.

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16 Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility” in LW 44:127.

17 Ibid., LW 44:13.
Luther is making a case against the church’s insistence that the church was not subject to the authority of non-clergy.\textsuperscript{18} He levels the playing field by using Paul’s parts of the body analogy and grounding our spiritual standing in our baptism, for which Paul has conveniently argued there is only one. “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” (Eph 4:4-7). Luther’s theological understanding of the laity and the clergy being of equal status is grounded in his understanding of all Christians being of the “spiritual estate”\textsuperscript{19} by virtue of their baptism. He reinforced this by arguing that priests and monks had specific tasks or positions, offices in the church but were not of a superior rank or order than other Christians. “Since the temporal authorities are baptized with the same baptism and have the same faith and Gospel as we, we must grant that they are priests and bishops, and count their office on which has a proper and a useful place in the Christian community. For whoever comes out the water of baptism can boast that he is already consecrated priest, bishop and pope.”\textsuperscript{20} By so doing, Luther changed the way vocation or calling was understood.

However, since Luther’s triumph in asserting that all occupations can be a calling from God, and a place where one’s vocation can be used in furthering the kingdom of God, the term has fallen into disuse. Lake Lambert summarizes, “While Luther and

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\textsuperscript{19} Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” in LW 44:129.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
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Calvin sacralized the secular by liberating vocation from the monastery, their later followers secularized the holy. The term ‘vocation’ now has only traces of a religious meaning, and its English equivalent, ‘calling,’ has been largely exiled to an ecclesiastical ghetto.” ²¹ Even those whose occupations are church-related but are not clergy are less likely to think of their work as a calling. Christians of all theological backgrounds and cultural situations could benefit from a renewed engagement with Luther’s writing and thinking on vocation as it will challenge one to consider how one’s own blend of giftedness, skills, abilities, and situation can be used for the benefit of others and expanding God’s work in the world.

One reservation contemporary Christians have had in embracing Luther on vocation is Luther’s encouragement to stay in one’s station. This notion rankles our modern and postmodern sensibilities, but for Luther, one’s beruf²² or occupation was a way to serve humankind. Luther’s encouragement to stay in one’s station was an acknowledgement of God’s sovereign good will for the world. One’s vocation was a way to serve others, not to better one’s position or earn merit toward salvation, but one’s vocation was for the sake of one’s neighbor.²³ Luther makes this point several times in his Church Postils, instructions to local preachers on how to interpret and proclaim texts throughout the year.

If you find yourself in a work by which you accomplish something good for God, or the holy, or yourself, but not for your neighbor alone, then you should know


²² Wingren, Luther on Vocation, 1.

²³ Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” in LW 44:130.
that that work is not a good work. For each one ought to live, speak, act, hear, suffer, and die in love and service for another, even for one’s enemies, . . . so that one’s hand, mouth, eye, foot, heart and desire is for others; these are Christian works, good in nature.  

Luther’s agenda is to define Catholic monasticism as self-serving and therefore not a worthy vocation. But in so doing, Luther invited all Christians to consider their occupations a means of serving God and humanity.

In the Reformed tradition, Calvin also encouraged blooming where one is planted, but for Calvin this was primarily for the purpose of proper order in the world.

The Lord bids each of us in all life’s actions to look to his calling. For he knows with what great restlessness human nature flames, with what fickleness it is born hither and thither, how its ambition longs to embrace various things at once. Therefore, lest through our stupidity and rashness everything be turned topsyturvy, he has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life. And that no one may thoughtlessly transgress his limits, he has named these various kinds of living “callings.” Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life.

Inspirational words, but in the postmodern world, where one’s station in life is not entirely scripted by birth, where many have more options and choices than can be easily managed, the injunction to stay in one’s station simply is not relevant. For those who lack choices due to poverty, discrimination, oppression or lack of access to education, such an injunction can hardly be seen as other than a tool of control to be used for the ongoing benefit of those in power.


Rather than discard or ignore Luther’s and Calvin’s teaching on vocation because of the encouragement to stay in one’s station, keep in mind the context in which they were written, and appropriate what can be reasonably applied today. It is sufficient to acknowledge that God can use any and everyone to further God’s purposes, in any and all kinds of roles and positions, so it is not essential to leave behind one’s occupation to follow God. Retirement, however, may be seen as actively pushing one out of one’s “station” thus allowing an opportunity to engage in questions of vocation anew.

The context of my own theological community has been the PC (USA), whose Book of Confessions provides a compilation of theological documents from different eras of the church (with emphasis on the Reformation and Protestant Scholasticism) and a Book of Order to provide structure and formal guidance on worship, governance and discipline. Though the Book of Order is a polity document, it is also an attempt to embody the Reformed theology of the Confessions with important applications to the issue of vocation, which the Confessions do not include. Therefore, the Book of Order—the current formal and normative source of faith and practice for the PC (USA)—will be considered. In addition to the references to vocation noted in chapter 2, the vocation of a Christian is described in the treatment of membership in a church. In the context of organizing a congregation and the meaning of membership and baptism, the Book of Order describes the ministry of members. (formatted as printed)

Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a joy and a privilege. It is also a commitment to participate in Christ’s mission. A faithful member bears witness to God’s love and grace and promises to be involved responsible in the ministry of Christ’s Church. Such involvement includes: proclaiming the good news in word and deed, taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation,
lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support, studying Scripture and the issues of Christian Faith and life, supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents, demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church, responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others, living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life, working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment, caring for God’s creation, participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one’s membership, and considering ways in which one’s participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.26

This description of and prescription for involvement in a community of faith is an articulation of how one lives out one’s calling. Since Christian faith is meant to be lived in community (which in the Protestant tradition has not included monasticism), this commitment to a group of believers, a church, is the context where one’s calling is discerned and experienced. Note the assertion that membership involves a “commitment to participate in Christ’s mission” and bearing witness to God’s love and grace before elaborating a list of likely behaviors. Faithful membership in a church, according to the Book of Order, is an articulation of how one lives into one’s Christian vocation.

Core Calling for Life: Continuing Transformation into the Image of Christ

Beginning with the end in mind, God’s plan for each of God’s people is to transform each one more and more into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:17). But that

transformation begins, especially in the Reformed understanding, with God’s initiative. God has adopted us (Jn 1:12-13, Gal 4:4-5, Rom 8:14-17, 2 Cor 6:18) and lavished us with love and grace (Eph 1:7). “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God: and that is what we are” (1 Jn 3:1). Therefore, from our identity as beloved of God, we live that out in response to God’s love. The apostle Paul unpacks the human story in broad brushstrokes in Ephesians 2:1-6: humanity apart from and within Christ. Paul then describes the Christian life in verses 7-10 so that in the coming ages 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 a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph 2:7-10 ESV).

The Greek word for “workmanship” in verse 10 is poiēma, which can mean “fiction, poetical work,” or literally a “thing made or created.”27 Humankind is God’s poem or God’s masterpiece. But as Paul notes earlier, even as God’s creation, humans are works of art created for something more than exhibition; God “destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:5). This is our identity. God lavished grace upon all humankind as a gift and firm in our identity and giftedness, we have been given good work, which we were created to do. One commentator titled this pericope “What it Means to Be a Christian.”28 This sounds like a calling, a purpose, a vocation. Humanity was created for God’s plans and God’s works. As N.T. Wright points out, “The longer


you look at Jesus, the more you will want to serve him in his world.”

What a wonderful purpose to continue to seek in retirement.

In our sociological context where people can retire and still have a third or more of their life expectancy before them, retirement represents an opportunity to be replanted, so to speak, in a new context in which to bloom. This opportunity is not to be taken lightly. Once a person steps down from a career or job, one must consider what will be his or her “good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Eph 2:10). Working to discern how one might best serve the kingdom in this “third third of life” is best undertaken while actively seeking the ongoing transformation espoused by Gregory of Nazianzus. Taking one’s own discipleship seriously is a good use of the time gained in retirement.

Mark Labberton also emphasizes the importance of identity in providing purpose: “We start recovering our call when we learn which first things are first. The love of God in Jesus Christ is the supreme first thing; no one and no thing rivals or surpasses this. If we want to know ourselves and why our life matters, the Bible’s advice is to know our maker, who knows and loves us fully.” But while our sense of calling begins with our

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identity as beloved, it does not end there. “If our vocation—hearing and living in response to the love of God for the sake of the world—is our calling, we need to grasp that it includes following Jesus into the lives and places of . . . suffering.” Some think one has a “right” to take it easy, to be self-focused after retirement. But “what does the Lord require of you” (Mi 6:8)? It is a question worth asking. Those who have meaning and purpose feel more fulfilled in retirement. It might involve entering into the suffering of the world. This can be challenging for those who have lived in privilege. The freedom and resources enjoyed by affluent Americans are not the norm for most of the planet’s population. As noted previously, Labberton asserts that “seeking a call that evades suffering is a decision neither to follow Jesus nor to live in the real world.” Which is not to say that we are to seek martyrdom, but to realize that suffering is a consequence of loving those who suffer. “Jesus doesn’t call us to make us martyrs. [At least he does not in the current sense of the term] He calls us to make us like himself. This requires a process of transformation.” One’s vocation, begins with an identity as beloved of God, grows as a person follows Jesus into a broken and hurting world, and results in his or her transformation more and more into the likeness of the one they are following.

33 Ibid., 126.
35 Labberton, Called, 125.
36 Ibid., 26.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 109.
The importance of transformation is also evident in two Catholic authors who write compellingly of two halves of the spiritual life: Franciscan priest Richard Rohr in *Falling Upward* and Ronald Rolheiser in *Sacred Fire*.\(^{39}\) Leaning on Carl Jung, Rohr posits that in the first stage, one is focused on establishing oneself: career, friendships, identity. The second stage involves growth brought on by some crisis or crises. Our growth comes because of the experience of falling/failing and only those who have gone down can experience the up of growth and maturity.

Similarly, Catholic priest Ronald Rolheiser speaks of a similar idea, calling it a “deeper maturity.”\(^{40}\) Initial maturity, in human terms, means moving from pleasure being our basic motivation to a more selfless perspective of acting for the good of others rather than ourselves. Along with this human maturity comes the “Essential Discipleship” he writes about in *The Holy Longing*.\(^{41}\) Beyond this basic discipleship of becoming more Christ-like through developing practices of prayer, morality, charity and justice consistent with Jesus’ teaching, and regular involvement with an ecclesial community, comes a next stage in our lives of faith.\(^{42}\) “Our question then is no longer: How do I get my life


\(^{40}\) Rolheiser, *Sacred Fire*, 57.


\(^{42}\) Rolheiser, *Sacred Fire*, 57.
together? Rather, it becomes: How do I give my life away more deeply, more generously, and more meaningfully?“\(^{43}\)

This second stage might begin in early adulthood, but all can benefit from working on deepening their lives of faith throughout their third third. Rollheiser’s discussion of a deeper maturity can encounter resistance from those suspicious of gnostic secrets and claims of higher levels of faith or spirituality, but Rollheiser links his discussion of maturity to stages akin to human development, much like James Fowler’s well-regarded work on stages of faith development.\(^{44}\) Rolheiser talks of this stage as mature discipleship.

Mature Discipleship is the struggle to give our lives away, after we have attained initial maturity. This generally constitutes the longest period of our lives, our “householder” years—those thirty, forty, fifty, or sixty years between land solidly somewhere in adulthood and looking at retirement and what lies beyond. Our basic anxiety during these years needs to be around the questions: How do I do this better, more generously? How do I make a deeper, more life-giving contribution?\(^{45}\)

While giving one’s life away is a normal part of ministry (whether ordained or not), moving toward retirement does not mean that process is over; rather the context for it changes. Rolheiser’s mature discipleship can still be the work of faith after retirement.\(^{46}\) Bob Buford, writing primarily to an audience of business and professionals, encourages a “Halftime” in life in which one takes stock of one’s life and giftedness to

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\(^{43}\) Ibid., 17.


\(^{45}\) Rolheiser, *Sacred Fire*, 95.

\(^{46}\) Ibid.
move from the first half focus on success to a second half focus on significance.\textsuperscript{47} Whether Catholic religious or corporate leader, these each resonate with Luther’s understanding of vocation as that which serves one’s neighbor, and it also speaks of the deep human transformation that Gregory wrote about as essential for those who would serve the church.\textsuperscript{48} Taking seriously this path of mature discipleship also addresses Labberton’s concern about the church’s general malaise being traceable to its members failing to follow Jesus.\textsuperscript{49} If Christians are growing deeper in their lives of faith both individually and corporately and that leads them into loving service of their neighbor in the name and for the sake of Christ, the church will be living out its purpose, the Missio Dei in the world.\textsuperscript{50} The next section on aging will consider what this service might look like for the retiree as he or she ages.

The core calling in the life of a Christian then, is to be transformed more and more into the image of Christ as Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” He prescribes it in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what

\textsuperscript{47} Bob Buford, Halftime: Changing Your Game Plan from Success to Significance (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).

\textsuperscript{48} Wingren, Luther on Vocation, 172; Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” LW 44:130; Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration II: In Defence of His Flight to Pontus,” 223-224.

\textsuperscript{49} Labberton, Called, 43.

is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” This ongoing individual transformation into the image of Jesus Christ is at the core of one’s calling as a Christian, according to sources as diverse as Gregory of Nazianzus in the 4th century and Mark Labberton in the 21st century. Curiously, this transformation makes you more fully yourself than you were before and is lived out in a world full of need and brokenness.  

Both must be considered as one seeks what one should do in any given context.

### Aging and Call

But if one has followed that prescription into the ministry in the first place, participants wonder how or why must one seek a new calling in retirement. They ponder if one must one retire at all. The effects of aging may render this question moot, but for those for whom it does not, they wonder if they must retire from active employment. Some have argued that retirement is not biblical, and some seminar participants have insisted that they intend to “die in the saddle,” or “pass in the pulpit.” At least for the priestly ministry in the temple, retirement is described in Scripture:

> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: This applies to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall begin to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting; and from the age of fifty years they shall retire from the duty of the service and serve no more. They may assist their brothers in the tent of meeting in carrying out their duties, but they shall perform no service. Thus you shall do with the Levites in assigning their duties (Nm 8:23-26).

There is a biblical reference to retirement, and it is specifically directed to the Levitical priesthood. The parallel to Protestant clergy is not perfect, and it does not constitute a

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mandate for clergy retirement, but it does at least suggest that for those serving God and God’s people, retirement certainly has a biblical warrant.

But if advancing age might suggest retirement from active service, it does not mean that God has no place for those who have served His church, and whether through age or circumstance retire from that service. The God who first called one to ministry is calling still. Each generation has a calling to share the mighty works of God with the next. The great Shema of Deuteronomy 6 where Israel is called to bind the words of God on their heads and hands and to recite them to their children, is echoed by the Psalmist,

He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands (Ps 78:5-6).

and is echoed again as a personal refrain and declaration, “O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come” (Ps 71:18-10).

Again, in a litany of praise and thanksgiving the psalmist proclaims this theme “One generation shall laud your works to another and shall declare your mighty acts” (Ps 145:4). Even in retirement, one must find a way to continue to proclaim God’s faithfulness and salvation history. God’s command to God’s people before they were to take possession of the land of promise was given “so that your days may be long” (Dt 6:2), and that “it may go well with you” (Dt 6:3), and so that “you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey” (Dt 6:3). In a time of shrinking church, with an increasing number of clergy retiring or reaching retirement age, God’s charge to all the
people to tell the next generation of God’s faithfulness is as relevant as it was when it was first given.

Despite Christians’ identity as children of God, an identity affirmed in Scripture and marked in baptism, western culture has managed to replace our identity: who we are with what we do.\(^5^2\) This is less true in some cultures where identity is still largely associated with family, land ownership, group membership, marital status, or other markers of belonging, but in western culture one’s identity in adulthood is largely tied to one’s occupation.\(^5^3\) This makes the transition from full-time employment to retirement a multi-faceted challenge. “Many men, and an increasing number of women, find that retirement from work brings a sudden loss of several foundational elements of their identity.”\(^5^4\) These can include changes in parental status as children grow and leave the home, social roles change without sports teams to coach or school organizations to volunteer with and for, and social connections decrease as colleagues and coworkers are less available than previously. As retirement looms, “middle adults wonder what will fill the gaps in meaning, purpose, and identity that work once provided.”\(^5^5\) The answer should be grounded in their identity and sense of mission. Frost and Hirsch note,

> For good or for ill, we are all players in the living drama going on around us. God has designed us as decision makers in his very image, as agents of the kingdom, not only to partake in history but to prayerfully shape and direct it in his name as

\(^{5^2}\) Paul C. Clayton, *Called for Life*, 87.


\(^{5^5}\) Bloom, “The Joys and Paradoxes of Vocation,” 145.
a true act of worship. And the part we play will depend largely on a clear sense of our mission, on the level of intentionality in what we do, and on the fortitude and integrity with which we do it.\textsuperscript{56}

One’s age must not obscure one’s calling. Following Jesus into a hurting world is bound to require risk which will necessitate courage. While maturity might make one less impulsive, it should not rob one of a sense of adventure.

The adventure is likely to look different at the beginning and end of retirement, but it can and should involve service for others. Someone described retirement in three stages, the Go-Go years, the Slow-Go years, and the No-Go years to correspond to the energy and mobility that ebbs as health and vitality wane. In the Go-Go years of early retirement, serving corporately might involve going on intergenerational mission trips with your church or Habitat for Humanity. Serving individually might range from extended childcare for one’s grandkids to volunteering one’s time on the board of a non-profit, or serving shifts at a local homeless shelter. In the Slow-Go years, the activity on the intergenerational mission trip might change from operating a jackhammer (I’ve watched a grandmother do this) to helping prepare the meals; or reducing one’s board commitments to local NPOs or reducing the number of shifts one serves at the shelter or providing limited clerical help at the shelter office. In the No-Go years, as mobility and energy begin to confine one’s activity, the service might be phone support for other home-bound friends, neighbors, or church members, or as diligent prayer support for a group at church, or friends across the nation or world. This focus on serving will ensure

that our activity in retirement is more than an amusing diversion, but connected to our vocation, for as Luther made clear, our vocation will involve serving others.

Stewardship of Giftedness for Transformation

The good news of the gospel is that our identity is found “in Christ,” a phrase used by the apostle Paul some 160 times in letters attributed to him.\(^{57}\) Our purpose and meaning can grow as we live out this identity, regardless of our age or stage. In retirement one can use his or her talents and abilities honed through years of work in a new context. Others might discover gifts and abilities that were unused in their career that blossom in the freedom that can emerge when released from the schedule and expectations of work. There is more at stake than personal fulfillment in retirement. One’s God-given gifts belong not to him or herself alone, but belong to the whole church, the whole body of Christ. Alan Hirsch insists that Jesus has given the church everything it needs to fulfill its purpose.”\(^{58}\) A retiree might well be God’s gift to a younger Christian looking for a mentor or for an entire congregation in need of wisdom, joy, compassion, or experience.

We are given the status of “children of God in Christ Jesus” as a gift through the sacrament of baptism (Gal 3:27-28), a sacrament celebrated in community. In addition to celebrating our adoption into the family of God, we are welcomed by and into the community of faith. It is a community that is both immediately present as well as spread

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\(^{57}\) Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2016), 87-88.

out across space and time. As such, it is a diverse community comprised of different ages, cultures, languages, and backgrounds. Yet despite this diversity, Paul insists that together we comprise the body of Christ on earth. He explores this image in First Corinthians 12, where he argues that through baptism all are made part of the whole.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body (1 Cor 12:12-15).

As Paul goes on to elaborate, each part of the body serves a different function, and is therefore necessary. To serve the needs of the body, each member is given different gifts. Paul arrives at the body image by way of a discourse on “the varieties of gifts” which are given by “the same Spirit” (1 Cor 12:4). “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). Using one’s gifts for the benefit of the Body of Christ provides meaning and purpose. This seems obvious but is often neglected in the structure of senior-living accommodations. As author and director of a senior living facility, Jill Vitale-Aussem notes, “people age well where they have a purpose, a role in their community.”\(^{59}\) In the Church, creating a community where all can use their gifts can help the Body function well as one but it takes intentionality.

**Formation in Christ for Retirees and Their Changing Role Within the Church**

Membership in the Body of Christ is an enduring aspect of one’s identity that carries with it both the general calling for all Christians and the particular call that may

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change with age and circumstance. As Paul Clayton observes, “Our calling in the last years and months of life is related to the calling of all our previous years. Each phase of our individual call led to another stage and another, and this last experience flows out of the calling we have known all along the way.”\textsuperscript{60} In the marathon that is one’s life, Scriptures encourage us to finish strong. The epistle to the Hebrews exhorts us to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1-2). The apostle Paul uses athletic metaphors in several of his epistles, especially the image of running a race (1 Cor 9:24-27, Gal 2:2, and Phil 2:16), and proudly proclaims that he had “finished the race” (2 Tm 4:6-8). J.I. Packer distills Paul’s notion of finishing strong to zeal, arguing that it is part of the character of God (Is 9:7), manifested in his son, Jesus (Jn 2:17) in whose image Christians are transformed by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18, Eph 4:20-24, Col 3:10).\textsuperscript{61} As the normal process of aging begins to take its toll on energy and stamina both mental and physical, one’s passion and commitment to the purposes of God, one’s zeal for God’s work can allow older believers to finish the race strong.

The church has historically been a context in which seniors have the opportunity to engage with young people, and where people of all ages can learn from those a little further along in life’s journey, but this has become limited.\textsuperscript{62} Especially in larger corporate size and mega-churches, much of the social involvement and frequently worship itself is segregated by age and stage. This is a tragic loss for both young and old.

\textsuperscript{60} Clayton, \textit{Called for Life}, 100.

\textsuperscript{61} J.I. Packer, \textit{Finishing Our Course with Joy} (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 73.

Matt Bloom writes of the importance of “exemplars” and “wise guides” for young and middle adults as they navigate their own sense of vocation, “Even more important were wise guides. They were almost always first viewed as exemplars—role models of excellence and authenticity in a profession . . . People often spoke of these as among the most important and rewarding friendships in their lives.”63

The challenge, according to Bloom, is finding an exemplar in the first place.64 This goal is made difficult not only by declining church attendance generally, but also by the tendency to segregate church activities, including worship, by age. In a church where one rarely interacts with others outside his or her own age and stage grouping, having the opportunity to build relationships with older adults who might serve as vocational “exemplars” and eventually “wise guides” is limited. The role of a retired lay person can become an expansive calling, limited only by temperament, and willingness to show up for and listen to others. Em Griffin is a good example. He is a retired college professor in the Chicago area whose eyes light up when speaking of the high school boys he mentors as a small group facilitator at his church. He attends some of their varsity volleyball games, engages them at church and beyond, and misses those who have graduated. His investment in their lives has enriched his own as well as theirs.

Allowing older believers safe and healthy interaction with children, youth, and young adults is an important reason for a church to be intergenerational. And while this is

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64 Ibid.
helpful for the members of a particular church (especially those involved in mentoring relationships), it is also essential for the well-being of the Church universal. Howard Vanderwell explains:

> Because the church will and must continue, each generation must shape the next generation so that each will know of God’s mighty acts. The interplay of the generations in reminding each other of the truth of the gospel and the acts of God is an indispensable element of the continuation of the church. Even though missions and outreach are a key part of the church’s ministry, we must acknowledge that more people have been brought into the Christian church by way of the Christian family and the instruction received there than through any other means.65

Multi-generational churches can help to transfer faith to the next generation, but they are also beneficial for the maturing of faith for those across the age spectrum. This brings with it leadership challenges as different generations often have different preferences (think music styles in worship, for example) but, as Gil Rendle points out, they are challenges worth the trouble.66 It requires a certain faith maturity for older believers and retired leaders to forgo their own preferences to welcome and comfort the next generation into worship and leadership roles. It requires the generosity and long-term perspective of a mature believer to understand that children are not only the future of the church, but the church today.67 Roehlkepartain developed an eight-part scale to

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describe the characteristics of a person with mature faith—regardless of age.\(^ {68}\) It is an excellent tool for considering life-long discipleship, but also what is required in our churches to bring generations together in ways that build faith within one another. This kind of interaction can provide another avenue for growing closer to Jesus in retirement.

Worship and leadership can invite young and old into active participation in ways other aspects of church may not, but only if those currently in positions of authority are willing to bridge the generational gaps, embrace discomfort, or even step out of the way at times.\(^ {69}\) According to the Search Institute, one with a mature faith “seeks to be part of a community of believers in which people . . . support and nourish one another . . . and hold a personal sense of responsibility for the welfare of others.”\(^ {70}\) An ecclesiology inclusive of all generations can significantly impact the identity of retirees and others on the margins as they come to see their giftedness being sought by and benefitting the Body of Christ. It is a blessed moment when a good mentor match is made between a young confirmand and a retired church secretary or a busy professional; but the retiree will likely have more time to invest in the relationship than the working professional.

The second chapter of the prophet Joel describes a solemn assembly of fasting and seeking God’s mercy in which all of God’s people are called to take part: “gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy” (Joel 2:16).

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\(^ {68}\) Roehlkepartain and Roehlkepartain, *Prescription for a Healthy Church*, 116.

\(^ {69}\) Rendle, *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge*, 106.

\(^ {70}\) Roehlkepartain and Roehlkepartain, *Prescription for a Healthy Church*, 116.
Whatever age or station, one’s participation in the life of the people of God is significant. This may be especially true if the church is to enact its role as a “community of calling” in which individuals can have their own evolving vocation affirmed and called forth in and through a community.  

Vocation, then, is not a solo effort. The question of calling has traditionally begun not as my individual vocation, the way it is commonly framed today, but as the common calling Christians share. Vocation is received in community, through community, and for the sake of community. Whatever the particularities of my call might be, from a Christian viewpoint, it can never be separate from my identity and calling as a member of Christ’s body.

How we live our lives in retirement when our end is near can be an expression of our callings, both general and particular. Most pastors can enumerate older members of their churches who are prayer warriors for their congregations, church staff, the community near and far, and the work of God in the world. Drawing from Henri Nouwen, Rolheiser writes of a “Radical Discipleship” that addresses the question of “How can I live so that my death will be an optimal blessing for my family, my church, and the world?” Nouwen notes that “Death does not have to be our final failure, our final defeat in the struggle of life, our unavoidable fate. If our deepest human desire is, indeed, to give ourselves to others, then we can make our death into a final gift.” Those who have spent much of their adulthood serving the church can refocus their energies in

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71 Cahalan, “Finding Life’s Purposes in God’s Purposes,” in Calling All Years Good, 11.
72 Ibid., 18.
74 Nouwen, Life of the Beloved, 95.
retirement to deepening their discipleship and preparing for their later adult years in order
continue to be a blessing to others in life and in death
PART THREE

MINISTRY PRACTICE
CHAPTER 4: DESIGN AND ASSESSMENT

This project was conceived as a means of making the Board of Pensions’ pre-retirement seminar less clergy-centric and more engaging for the increasing number of lay people who are serving churches and mid councils in a variety of roles. The intention was to offer training for the Retirement Planning Consultants and the few Board staff responsible for leading the “Growing Into Tomorrow . . . Today” seminar. Since the project was conceived, the author moved to a different role on the Board’s staff, and the Education Team has designed a new pre-retirement seminar called “THRIVE” — for Thinking Retirement: Identity, Vocation, and Economics.¹ The three tools listed in the final paragraph of the introduction will be offered for use as initially intended, and may be adopted for inclusion in subsequent versions of THRIVE, but as the Retirement Consultant position has been eliminated, there will not be the opportunity to assess the

tools’ effectiveness by the Retirement Consultants who were familiar with the “Growing Into Tomorrow . . . Today” (GITT) seminar.

**Goals**

The preferred future the Board is striving for in terms of their pre-retirement seminar is to engage lay members as well as clergy in considering God’s call on their lives, both while in active employment and when their active employment with the church or church-related organization has concluded. This raises a significant challenge. Kathleen Cahalan and her interdisciplinary colleague members of The Collegeville Institute Seminar on Vocation across the Lifespan have been studying and writing about the topic since 2011. Working to “engage vocation across the span of our lives,” they sought to understand how (non-clergy) church people understand calling and found that “most people . . . had limited, mostly nonexistent experiences and conceptions of God as Caller.”

The first step to overcome the lack of familiarity with this way of interpreting life theologically will be to invite participants to do such reflection alone, and then expose them to others, often pastors, for whom such reflection is more common. The GITT included a brief theological reflection that was assigned as pre-seminar reading for the participants. Chapter 5 of this work offers a fresh article that is written more conversationally and with less formal theological language to be more easily accessible to a non-clergy audience.

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2 Cahalan, “Finding Life’s Purposes in God’s Purposes,” in *Calling All Years Good*, 2.
The second step toward the preferred future will be to frame the contemplation of and engagement with the notion of calling and purpose with worship. While the *GITT* was always begun and concluded with a brief worship service, we will craft the worship experience on the idea that God is the one who calls. The relevance and connection to the laity can be made explicit by acknowledging the non-priestly nature of the characters in the biblical text selected for worship. These figures, while looming large in the biblical narrative, are ordinary people.

The third step toward increasing the engagement of lay members are multiple opportunities for reflection. First, reflection questions are woven into the article (chapter 5), and as a separate exercise following the article (chapter 5), as well as a more carefully crafted small group discussion of calling, both in context and content. This comprises Appendix F and has been structured to invite retrospection on God’s activity in one’s life and a consideration of how to attend to God’s ongoing guidance and calling. The *GITT* has included exercises to engage participants in contemplation of purpose and motivations in their past endeavors as well as discussion of an understanding of calling, but the latter was clearly phrased and intended for clergy while the former was often not connected to God’s activity or guidance.

**Crafting a Theology of Call in Retirement**

To create a context where participants are invited and encouraged to consider their own callings, the staff members leading these seminars need to be comfortable with such language. Cahalan notes that “most communities are not places of calling—that is, communities whose vocation is to draw forth each person’s callings as well as the
vocation of the whole community.” Therefore, the seminar will seek to introduce them to an experience of community that seeks to evoke an experience of calling, or at least an opportunity to consider what one’s calling might be. While the term “vocation” has lost much of its meaning for most people, the “language of callings” will be woven throughout the stories of people gathered to talk about their sense of God at work in and through their lives. The seminar leadership must model and encourage the participants—especially the lay people—to consider their lives from the perspective of those who have been and are continuing to be called by God.

Worship provides the bookends for the experience, seeking to begin the seminar by inviting contemplation of God as the one who calls and encourage the participants to be attentive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The seminar also concludes with worship which can both wrap-up the experience and invite an ongoing receptivity to God’s leading as the attendees go forth to continue the process of preparation for retirement with a renewed sense of purpose.

Care should be taken in selecting the texts for worship to emphasize God’s initiative but also people’s responsiveness to the unexpected. The texts discussed in chapter 3 are all appropriate examples among others in Scripture. Reflections offered on the text(s) should highlight the ordinariness of the people involved who did extraordinary

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3 Ibid., 3.
4 Ibid., 4.
5 Ibid., 2.
things in response to God’s call, or as agents of God in a world of need. The biblical characters selected for theological reflection in chapter 3 (Abraham and Sarah, Mary, and Paul) are, of course, exceptional in many respects: Abraham, the patriarch through whom God chose to bless the world; Mary, the Theotokos (mother of God) or instrument of the incarnation; and Paul, the apostle to the gentiles who was primarily responsible for the spread of a little-known Jewish sect throughout the Roman world and author of much of the New Testament. But as Scripture presents them, they were ordinary people who were used by God in extraordinary ways. These need not be the texts selected for worship in the seminar but are noted as illustrative of a theme that can be highlighted in whatever passages are chosen.

**Content of the Strategy**

The cadre of a dozen or more consultants and Board staff who led the GITT has been reduced to two staff members who were primarily responsible for creating the new THRIVE seminar, so a workshop to introduce these tools is no longer called for. However, they may choose to integrate the tools offered (monograph, worship service outlines, and sharing exercise) into the new seminar. The monograph as presented in chapter 5 includes an invitation to seminar participants to begin reflecting on their own vocational journeys with an eye toward purpose, meaning, and the variety of ways God has been at work in their lives thus far.

Worship remains an important element of the seminar. Since identity is one of the subjects addressed explicitly, and it is clearly central to the notion of calling and purpose, grounding the seminar in worship reminds participants of the true source of their identity:
the God who calls them. The sample outlines for opening and closing worship comprise Appendices A-D. Including non-clergy participation in leading worship and using non-clergy examples and illustrations in the reflection or homily is encouraged because of the expectation of increasingly lay participation in the seminars.

The discussion exercise questions included as Appendix E are drawn primarily from Walter Wright’s book *The Third Third of Life* and informed by an understanding of how calling tends to be understood. Matt Bloom, psychologist and contributor to the book *Calling All Season’s Good* suggests that those who consider their own experiences through “the lens of calling . . . do it primarily through . . . ‘retrospective sense-making,’ looking back and creating a narrative to make sense of their lives and discovering God’s hand at work in the past.” Wright notes in his introduction, “The questions and exercises . . . are designed to surface your story; it is your story that matters.” This exercise can also be engaged by seminar leadership as part of preparing for leading THRIVE. Because narrative is so central to identity and vocation, creating opportunities to share stories is not a luxury, but an essential component of re-crafting one’s vocation afresh in retirement. As David Lose points out, human beings are at their essence narrative creatures: “Homo Narrans” and so engaging one another with stories is an important and innately human activity.

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6 Wright, *The Third Third of Life*.  
7 Cahalan, “Finding Life’s Purposes in God’s Purposes,” in *Calling All Years Good*, 3.  
8 Wright, *The Third Third of Life*, 12.  
Since clergy presumably have had more exposure to the language of calling and vocation than most lay people, it is likely that in a mixed group, those more familiar with the subject will speak first (and most). Dividing the seminar into lay and clergy groups for the discussion questions will help to alleviate the tendency of lay people to defer to clergy on theological or other churchy subjects. This is especially important as our culture has become increasingly secular. Placing spouses in separate groups whenever possible will also allow all participants in the conversation a more equal footing. Inviting non-clergy groups to be the first to report back to the larger group can also be an effective strategy to help stories of vocation be shared. As Cahalan and her contributors assert, “vocation . . . is inherently narrative. Its first language is story.” Another approach to encouraging reflection and sharing on a subject like calling that some are less conversant with, would be to structure these as “think, pair, share” sequences. Invite the seminar participants to take three to five minutes to reflect on a particular question and write brief responses before pairing them off (perhaps with someone of a similar vocational background) to talk about the question. The pairs are invited to share insights with the larger group as time allows.

One of the many roles of the seminar leadership is making, or helping to make, relevant theological connections when those linkages are not apparent. One of the most helpful exercises in the GITT was designed to help identify “drivers” which Sedlar and Miners describe as internal motivators “that turn you on and make you tick as a person”

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10 Cahalan, “Finding Life’s Purposes in God’s Purposes,” in Calling All Years Good, 6.
and are critical in feeling fulfilled in retirement.\textsuperscript{11} This would be an important exercise to continue using in the new \textit{THRIVE} seminar. Many clergy, who are immersed in biblical admonitions of humility, were surprised to find that one of their key drivers was recognition. For those who are not accustomed to thinking theologically, being reminded that God’s creation of their individual giftedness is part of their calling. This reminder may not have been necessary for the clergyperson but making the connection explicit for the sake of others in the seminar was an important contribution of the discussion facilitator. Helping those gathered have a taste of being “a community of calling” is an important part of the experience.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Assessment Plan}

While there will not be a workshop to assess, the staff leaders of the seminar can be interviewed to assess their response to the tools offered in this initiative. They are familiar with the current reading, Jack Stotts’ “What is Our Calling When We No Longer Have a Call?”\textsuperscript{13} and so are in a position to evaluate whether the offered monograph is a suitable replacement. Questions could include both cognitive and affective domains: “Do you think the new monograph is less clergy-centric?” “Does it seem more accessible to a broader variety of educational backgrounds than the Stotts piece?” “Have participants in


\textsuperscript{12} Cahalan, “Finding Life’s Purposes in God’s Purposes,” in \textit{Calling All Years Good}, 3.

\textsuperscript{13} Jack L. Stotts, “What is Our Calling When We No Longer Have a Call?” \textit{Windows} vol. 114 no.1 (Winter 1999).
your seminars read it?” “Are you comfortable leading discussions about calling based on the participants’ reading of the monograph?” Similar questions could be asked about their reaction to the discussion questions. If the education team engages in the discussion questions as a team exercise, they will have the opportunity to assess its utility from their own experience as well as from the participants’ perspective if they elect to use them. These are included as Appendix G.

A survey is provided as Appendix H to assess cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to the monograph and sharing exercise. The instrument will include Likert scales and short open-ended questions. The intent of the survey is to provide participant feedback on the new pieces of the seminar to allow Board staff the ability to discern the value of including them in upcoming versions of THRIVE.
CHAPTER 5:

THEOLOGY OF VOCATION: A MONOGRAPH

FOR ACTIVE WORK IN THE CHURCH AND RETIREMENT

God is Still Calling; Are You Still Listening?

You’re reading this because you’ve enrolled in a pre-retirement seminar. Your retirement may be years, months or only weeks (or days!) away, but congratulations on taking the time to begin to consider this important transition. Whether you approach this transition with excitement, fear, relief, uncertainty, anticipation, or are too exhausted to do much more than go through the motions, the good news is that God is not finished with you yet! The seminar in which you’ll be engaged will help you explore this next stage of life as part of your journey of faith and will invite you to consider your life holistically including finances, housing, health, relationships as well as vocation and identity.

These are all important, but our identity is especially so, because in western culture we have a deeply embedded confusion between doing and being. Since we tend to define ourselves largely by our work (especially paid work), when we are no longer paid to work, we risk losing our sense of who we are. Our identity can take a real hit in
retirement. If my vocation, my calling (or for pastors, “my call”) is the church I work at, how can I find out what God is calling me to be and do afterward?

The Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (USA) embraces a holistic understanding of well-being as described in “A Theology of Benefits.”¹ As you prepare for the seminar, in addition to an ongoing exploration of what is in store for you in this next season of life, we want to encourage you to think about it theologically and spiritually while you prepare for it practically. How does God fit into your retirement? Or better yet, how does your retirement fit into God’s ongoing work in and care for the world?

Novelist and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner muses on vocation acknowledging that many kinds of voices can be calling one to different kinds of work, and then he offers this gem: “The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.”² After providing a pithy example of each he concludes “Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”³ Buechner’s brevity, simplicity, and elegant prose have made this one of the most known and loved perspectives on vocation among his Presbyterian colleagues, and some version of his reflection has informed many individuals’ sense of


³ Ibid. 95.
call to ministry, ordained or not. This meshing of love and need have been evident to many working in and for the church as their individual passion met the needs of others admirably. But what about when the job comes to an end? You are still called and must still discern your passion and the world’s need and seek to bring them together, but in new ways. This continues to be valid and vital in retirement, though perhaps harder to live into or even articulate.

Whether you are a pastor, church secretary, business administrator, sexton, church or mid-council staff member, pastor, or church musician, your work in and for the church has been an expression of your vocation or calling. Once you retire from your current role, where will you find meaning and purpose? What will your vocation be? How might it include your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger? Let’s begin by taking a quick look at the word “vocation.”

Vocation, Calling, Purpose, Meaning

Vocation was once a central doctrine of Protestant Christianity but has fallen into disuse. Vocation comes from the latin “vocare,” literally “to call,” and refers to the work one is called to by God. In Roman Catholicism it is used to talk about specific religious occupations. For Martin Luther, it was central to his reform of the church as he sought to engage the laity in understanding their work as part of God’s work in the world especially on behalf of their neighbor. This was a major contribution of Luther to the broader Christian world. He expanded vocation to include all of us, in all lines of work and all

4 Marc Kolden. “Luther on Vocation” Word & World, Vol. 3, 4 (Fall 1983), 386. See also John Lenker, ed. The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1905), 10:239-249.
seasons of life affirming that whatever work we do that serves the broader community is holy work. But while “vocation” and “calling” have become less commonly used, the language of “purpose” and “meaning” are becoming more familiar. Evangelical pastor Rick Warren’s best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life* was but one example of this shift, yet his use of the term “purpose” is little different than Luther’s use of “vocation.”

In the introduction to her excellent theological reflection upon vocation across the lifespan, *Calling All Years Good*, Kathleen Cahalan notes that “... vocation is a deeply human quest. What is the purpose of my life? To what shall I give myself? Whom shall I serve? Such questions are at the same time both frightening and exhilarating.” These are versions of the seemingly perennial question, “What will you be when you grow up?” They are as worthy of our attention before retirement as they were at the various times in our lives when we wrestled with our education and our employment. But our calling is not just our own, as Mark Labberton cautions: “‘What is God’s call on my life?’ The question is earnest but individualistic, often neglecting the shared vocation for the people of God.” What has God called all of God’s people to do, and how can I best be a part of that? It is to this important question we now turn.

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5 Cahalan, “Finding Life’s Purposes in God’s Purposes,” in *Calling All Years Good*, 4-5.

6 Ibid., 5.

7 Ibid.

The Ongoing Call of Discipleship

Let’s be clear: God has a calling for all Christians. Before we get to what God would call you to do in retirement (or at any particular time or place), we must understand God’s more general call upon us all. One of the wonderful refrains in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ interactions with his disciples is the phrase “Come, follow me.” This is the general call upon all Christians; to follow Jesus who calls us to himself. And lest that calling be interpreted too individualistically, as in “just me and Jesus,” he affirmed the additional call of loving your neighbor in his response to the scribe who asked about the greatest commandment. This holistic love of God, with heart, soul, mind, and strength—followed by the love of your neighbor—is a life’s work that provides direction across circumstances.

Former President of Columbia Seminary, Steve Hayner taught me (and hundreds of college kids at University Presbyterian in Seattle) that the three priorities of a Christian life were an ongoing, ever-increasing commitment: 1) to God, 2) to God’s People, and 3) to God’s work in the world. Each of these areas is to be a dynamic, ongoing, growth-oriented adventure that will last a lifetime. Decades before Carol Dweck popularized the idea of a “growth mindset” (as opposed to a fixed mentality), we were taught that our lives of faith required an ongoing commitment to growth. This is what it means to follow Jesus. Continuous growth, effort, and challenge. A life of discipleship that involves

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9 See Mk 1:16-20; Mt 4:18-22; Mt 9:9-13; Mk 2:13-17; Lk 5:1-11; Lk 5:27-32.
10 See Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-28.
following someone who is, as author Tim Hansel once put it, “notoriously unpredictable.” The Jesus of Scripture is constantly eating with the wrong people, ignoring important religious conventions of the day, and generally not doing what was expected of him. These three priorities, which summarize God’s call to everyone always, make a useful framework in which to think about our callings as Christians facing the great shift of our working lives in retirement.

**Priority One: An Increasing Commitment to God**

Jesus is “God with us.” Following Jesus results in our taking part in causes great and small, but always consistent with the purposes of Christ. As Labberton observes, “The kingdom of God is always intimate but never small. This is what drew and draws people to Jesus. It all turns, however, on our response to Jesus’ two words: ‘Follow me.’ This is the primary call of God that creates and defines the church.”

It is critical that we get this primary call right in our own lives and keep it a first order priority. Only then can the secondary challenge of discerning what we should do or be in a specific context make any sense. Our failure to get this primary calling right, our failure to actually follow Jesus is creating a crisis for the church and the world. Retirement is a time to reground ourselves in this priority. The risk if we do not do so is that we go into the third third of our lives feeling (and perhaps being) spiritually empty. If you have spent most of your life working in churches, it can be easy to assume that you have your Christian priorities in order simply by association and familiarity. We must

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intentionally put into place, or put back into place, regular practices of Scripture reading and prayer (apart from the necessary work to prepare a sermon or lead worship!) These practices renew our ability to follow Jesus.

**Exercise:** As you begin to consider what retirement might look like, ground your process in the primary call of God on your life. Revisit your prayer mentor(s) or explore a new practice or author as a guide to spark your interest. Don’t go it alone but do spend time alone in prayer and reflection. Even extroverts need to protect time for communion with God alone. Especially as you consider a significant change in life such as retirement, investing in the foundational call on our lives, the call to follow Jesus, is essential work in allowing us to discern to what and whom God might be calling us.

Presbyterian pastor and former Dubuque Seminary faculty member Gary Hansen’s award-winning book, *Kneeling with Giants* is a trustworthy source of historic Christian prayer practices and a useable guide for this sort of thing.\(^{13}\) It introduces you to ten remarkable figures from across the centuries of Christian experience whose practice of prayer is still drawing people into God’s presence. It features a range of widely different ways of praying, each one with deep roots in a major tradition, that are able to help people with very different personalities facing very different circumstances.

If you find you’re interested in pursuing contemplative prayer (which Hansen introduces in the chapter on the “Cloud of Unknowing,”) another accessible guide is

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\(^{13}\) Gary Neal Hansen, *Kneeling with Giants: Learning to Pray with History’s Best Teachers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012).
Thomas Keating’s work on the Catholic practice of centering prayer. Unlike some popular contemplative approaches, centering prayer’s origin lies within the Christian tradition, rather than having been borrowed from an Eastern religion. He grounds the premise of centering prayer to Jesus’ suggestion in Matthew 6:6, “But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Keating shows the approach is rooted in Jesus’ own practice, the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the experience of the early church.

To ensure your ongoing growth in this first priority of the Christian life, enrich your practice of prayer. Prayer is the direct contact with the God of the universe that gave us our calling the first place—that life-transforming encounter which Gregory of Nazianzus insisted was what qualified us for ministry. Prayer is the substance of the relationship which is intended to grow ever more intimate through every phase of life. Beyond our years of paid service and into eternity, we draw near to God in love.

Priority Two: An Increasing Commitment to God’s People, the Church

When we’re working at a church, especially in a programmatic capacity, it’s hard not to spend much of your time in the company of other Christians. But once you retire, where do your primary relationships come from? With whom do you develop friendships and how does one do that? What does this look like when we’re no longer on staff? Part

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of the leadership? No longer the center of attention? What larger purpose may we discover in the church? If you are in a pastoral role and your retirement requires you to leave the church you were serving and perhaps even leave the community of which you’ve been a part, how do you build or rebuild a friendship network? Retirement is a great time to work on the second priority of the Christian life—progressively deepening our commitment to the people of God. The risk if we don’t is that we enter the third third of our life in profound loneliness. Be intentional about making part of that process committing to a new church, or body of believers.

Find a small group to join or create one. Look for a role to play in your new context where you can exercise your gifts, but without becoming the “pastor” or “staff person.” Consider hosting or organizing a monthly lunch for retired clergy or church workers in your area. Perhaps you could begin a book group around a topic you’re interested in. Make sure you meet at least six or seven times before asking if they’d like to select a new book and continue meeting. Or offer the Committee on Preparation for Ministry to organize mentors/liaisons for those in the call process in your presbytery. In ministry it can be easy to go wide rather than deep in terms of personal relationships. Invest the energy and risk being vulnerable to be known well by a few. Deepen those relationships that might not be your closest friends but are people with whom you share interests and especially those with whom you share faith. Increase your connection with and commitment to the people of God.

**Exercise:** Don’t go it alone. Take the time and invest the energy to engage seriously in the small group sharing opportunities in the upcoming seminar. And then, take it a step further. When you get home, consider whom, among your friends, family,
and colleagues might be someone you’d like to have as a conversation partner, or better yet, gather a small group to commit to a regular conversation around some of the issues you’ve been introduced to in the seminar. Make a goal to meet for breakfast within the next month.

Take advantage of some of the excellent books on preparing for retirement currently available. Walter Wright’s *The Third Third of Life: Preparing for Your Future* is laid out in eight chapters and would make a perfect weekly study for two months, and has group discussion questions at the end of each chapter and even a brief appendix about facilitating such a group.\textsuperscript{15} If you’re a pastor or inclined to think theologically, *Aging Matters: Finding Your Calling for the Rest of our Life*\textsuperscript{16} could serve as the focus for group discussion. Paul Stevens lays out a case for the importance of discerning one’s calling in later life, walks the reader through aging as a spiritual journey with pitfalls and vistas, and explores the importance of leaving a legacy. He has a section on spirituality which is particularly engaging for those in the “sandwich generation” who are caring for aging parents while anticipating retirement themselves. He also has a wise and insightful cautionary chapter on “The Vices of Aging”\textsuperscript{17} and its companion chapter on “The Virtues of Late Life.”\textsuperscript{18} Sadly, the former will no doubt bring to mind someone or several someones you’ve known in your work in the church; happily, the latter might as well.

\textsuperscript{15} Wright. *The Third Third of Life.*

\textsuperscript{16} Stevens. *Aging Matters.*

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 84.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 100.
Priority Three: An Increasing Commitment to God’s Work in the World

Once you have re-established the first two priorities of your life of faith, deepening your own relationship with God, and finding a group of believers with whom you can grow in relationship and commitment, you can begin to nurture your third priority: a growing commitment to God’s work in the world. Perhaps the most helpful way of framing this priority and a way to lay a solid foundation for discerning your particular calling at any age or stage in life is a twofold question: ask yourself, “What is God doing in the world?” And then ask “How can I be a part of it?” Wrestling with these questions on your own in prayer, and in the company of fellow believers can be a wonderfully helpful step in considering the more particular question of what God might be calling you to do in retirement. This topic is likely foremost on the minds of those facing retirement, and framing it as an essential priority of the Christian life can help. The risk of not addressing it is that we go into the third third of life lacking a sense of contribution, service, and legacy.

This process of discernment is meant to keep you growing in your relationship with God, with God’s people, and continuing to take part in God’s work in the world, in ways that are appropriate for whom God has made you to be and in ways that allow your gifts, abilities, hopes, and dreams to be beneficial to others. The pre-retirement seminar will introduce you to abundant resources to help your exploration of what life might look like in retirement, including some exercises designed to jumpstart the process.

Reflection: Think back. Do you remember the challenge and excitement of trying to figure out where you might go to college, or what you would do after high school? The
world seemed wide-open with possibilities and options. If college was the plan, and you had reasonable grades and test scores, your mailbox was flooded daily with literature from schools near and far in all shapes and sizes. Which would be the right one? Where could you afford to go? Which might accept you, and perhaps offer you tuition assistance of some type? Many people find that they are similarly overwhelmed upon retirement with options from various people, non-profits, boards of directors, social service agencies, and church groups/committees/boards, all of whom are convinced that you and your newly found spare time will be the perfect fit for their organization’s needs. This time bursting with opportunities need to be reframed as a process of discernment for how we are investing our gifts in service of the world’s needs. Think of the parable of the talents and how you will steward that which you’ve been given to avoid simply getting sucked into the agenda of an organization or the demands of its people.

**Exercise:** Make a pro/con list of: 1) any offers/invitations you receive, 2) your own ideas, dreams and options. Consider graciously declining all such offers for the first year as you begin to accustom yourself to your new-found freedom! Then engage in some intentional practices of discernment about which of the options, ideas or dreams you’ll eventually pursue or say “yes” to.

**Reflection:** Discernment is a process for making decisions that consciously seeks to prioritize God’s purpose and intent for us. Elizabeth Liebert asserts that “The importance of desiring to follow God’s call through your decision making cannot be overstated. The attitude of indifference—that is, being willing to choose what God desires over all the other lesser things we might also desire—is the essential starting point
Liebert’s book is a great resource for practicing discernment while teaching you about it. Engage in a process of discernment as you prepare for retirement.

Possible steps to discern a calling: 1) Pray about it. 2) Search Scripture. 3) Ask friends for guidance. 4) Live “as if” option A were the case for one week; then live “as if” option B were the case for one week. 5) Journal and listen for God’s word to you.

What God wants for you will ultimately be more fulfilling and meaningful than what you might conjure up on your own. God earnestly desires to transform you more and more into the image of his Son (2 Cor 3:18), and if you’re willing to take part in the process, the transformation is likely to be less painful and more joyful.

For Further Reflection: If you need some help in sorting through your passion and purpose, or discerning your calling or vocation, there is a plethora of books and resources available. Go to a library or find a book online. Perhaps best known is Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven Life. Another time-honored resource is Episcopal Priest Richard Bolles work, What Color is Your Parachute? It has been the best-selling career/job book for 35 years and is now available in an edition for retirement

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21 Purpose and Passion have become something of a cottage industry in publishing, and a quick search on the topic will yield dozens of titles. Two that happen to be on my shelf are Robin Chaddock’s Discovering Your Divine Assignment: A Step-by-Step Plan for Living Out Your Purpose and Passion (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2005). And Bruce Bugbee’s What You Do Best in the Body of Christ: Discover Your Spiritual Gifts, Personal Style, and God-Given Passion (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

Full of exercises and wisdom, it is worth exploring. Two others of note, the first because it has had the most significant impact on my own thinking and comes from a pastoral and theologically savvy source with an evangelical leaning, yet grounded in the Reformed tradition: Mark Labberton’s *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today.* The second because it comes from a different stream of the Christian tradition and is written by a business professor who is also an Assistant Pastor at the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago. Nicholas Pearce’s *The Purpose Path: A Guide to Pursuing Your Authentic Life’s Work,* draws from his work looking at successful corporations that are purpose-driven and wildly profitable, as well his pastoral instincts which lead to a focus on integrity and courage. Deftly weaving anecdotal illustrations with data from diverse sources including academic research and census data, Pearce paints a compelling case for the need for courage to follow one’s purpose path.

In summary, a quick game plan for discernment as you move toward retirement:

First, do spend time alone in prayer and reflection—even you extroverts! Create some regular space and time to journal, pray, reflect on your life and ministry, and occupation(s) to consider what has given you energy and enjoyment. Second, (again) don’t go it alone—even you introverts! Engage in small-group or one-on-one conversations about your own gifts and abilities, and the needs of the world around you. Third, in addition to that reflection, seek to become aware of the hurt and need in the

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24 Labberton, *Called.*

world, and find ways to serve. Read the newspaper. Pay attention to the panhandlers you come across. Talk with them. Watch documentaries and follow blogs that make you uncomfortable. There is no shortage of brokenness in our world. Jesus addressed it. Will you?

Our Calling’s Outward Focus

One of the important differences between the historic Christian understanding of vocation and the more current focus on passion and purpose is that since Martin Luther, the doctrine of vocation has emphasized the needs and well-being of others. This emphasis on the needs of others is a necessary corrective to the potential to be too self-absorbed in retirement. Besides rescuing the term from purely clerical use, Luther’s most important contribution to our understanding of vocation or calling was to emphasize this outward focus; this need for one’s work to benefit others. Over fifty years ago, Bruce Larson wrote “any kind of personal relationship with Christ which does not involve us with a suffering world for which Christ died, is certainly an affront to the very Lord who is in His world suffering with all people.” More recently, N.T. Wright observed, “The longer you look at Jesus, the more you will want to serve him in his world. That is, of course, if it’s the real Jesus you’re looking at.” It’s easy to insulate ourselves from the

26 Marc Kolden, “Luther on Vocation” Word & World Vol. 3, 4 (Fall 1983), 386. See also John Lenker, ed. The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1905) 10:239-249.

27 Bruce Larson, Dare to Live Now! (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1965), 125.

needs all around us. To ensure that you’re sufficiently attentive to the hurt and brokenness you might otherwise miss, consider praying World Vision founder, Bob Pierce’s famous prayer: “Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God.”

Of course, your involvement in the suffering of the world might look different in retirement than it did in your working years, and it doesn’t mean that you can’t slow down a bit or change direction. That’s part of the freedom that comes with a disengagement from the tasks, responsibilities and demands on your time that defined your work. And as you’re freed from those limitations, you can be free for new opportunities and to explore possibilities that were just not practical when you were working. But the needs of the world are still out there, and our calling to follow Jesus hasn’t changed. The context in which we live out that calling will.

Perhaps your role as a church musician required you to hold a position as a music teacher in the schools, and the combination of the two kept you from being available to play in the local symphony or sing with local chorus. Soon, in retirement, you could have the freedom to play and perform without the responsibility of leadership. Or perhaps your role as a church secretary meant you couldn’t worship at the church where you spent most of your working hours because to be in the building felt like work. But in retirement, you could be free to worship wherever you chose without feeling like Sunday was just another work day. Perhaps your role as a church sexton meant you spent much of your time repairing and maintaining a structure without ever feeling like your work

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was complete. Imagine the freedom to take part in a Habitat for Humanity project, where you could build a house as part of a team and have a sense of closure and completion for a project that would make a real difference in some family’s daily life. And at the end of the weekend, you got to walk away when it was done! Perhaps you’re a pastor, and along with the chance to sit in the pew and worship with your spouse for the first time in decades, you could also leverage your passion for the church and your compassion for clergy, by forming a pastoral support group for the younger ministers in your area. It might be fun for you and life-giving for them.

Retirement can allow you the time and capacity to explore areas of your own giftedness that might have been underused or undiscovered in your vocational life. Perhaps you’ve served as a sexton or administrative assistant in a church for years. You know better than most what it takes to make a church work, and as you’ve grown in your own faith, you’ve wondered if you might have something to offer from the pulpit? There are a growing number of small, often rural, churches that need their pulpits filled and can no longer afford a fulltime pastor. Perhaps you’ve joined the session of a church and now you might pursue training as a layperson to preach. Or as a pastor in your vocational life you enjoyed the arts and weaving visual art into the worship life of your church. Perhaps in retirement you could nurture the artist within through classes and practice you’d never had time for before. It might look like a hobby but feel like your life’s work.

Another possibility is that your vocational life equipped you to do certain things like consulting, coaching, preaching, mentoring…whatever, that you could develop further in retirement and make use of in a new context. I know of a career IBM manager who, in retirement, used his considerable administrative and human resource experience
to bless his church by taking on a staff leadership role that allowed the pastor to focus more on preaching and pastoral care. After a few years of blessing this congregation, my friend sought training and certification in coaching which will be a blessing to many churches and not-for-profit organizations and their leadership.

God isn’t finished with you yet! Whatever you did with your working or professional life, your retirement provides you with an opportunity to reset, recalibrate, and restart. What better way to do so than in prayer and conversation consider where the world’s deep hunger and your deep gladness might meet?
Personal Reflection Exercise

Some of us are naturally more reflective than others and for some of us, we have a harder time discerning God’s work in our lives. The seminar you’ll be attending will provide some opportunity to do both, but the experience will be richer if you begin to think about it in advance.

Many of these questions are drawn and adapted from Walter Wright’s book, *The Third Third of Life*. If they provide you with some insight, imagine how much you might learn from reading the book with some friends or colleagues and discussing the questions together.

1. Take a blank sheet of paper, draw a vertical line down the middle, and on the left side jot down some of the important roles you’re filled currently filling. They can be relational/vocational or some combination. Then use the right-hand column to describe yourself as you imagine those who see you in that role might describe you.
   
   A) Review the right-hand column and circle or highlight descriptive words that occur more than once.
   
   B) Does this sound like you? Why or why not?

2. *Who* has shaped you? *What* has shaped you? Make another two-column page and list people and events that have shaped you since your childhood on the left, and in the right column note what you learned from each person/event.

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³⁰ Wright, *The Third Third of Life*.
3. Looking back on your life, the roles you’ve filled and the people and events that 
have shaped you, can you begin to describe a “calling” or a purpose, or a mission 
that seems to define or describe why you’re here on earth?

4. Can you sense the presence of God in any of the events/people/situations that 
have shaped you? Or perhaps in your response to them? It’s ok if the answer is 
“no.” But if “yes,” then write a sentence or two saying why this is so: why God 
was there; what God was saying to you.

5. One practice that can help you to begin paying attention to your life, especially to 
God’s work in and through your life, is to cultivate the practice of gratitude. Even 
if your life is or has been difficult or painful, there are surely things for which you 
can give thanks. Take some time each day in the time between now and the 
seminar to consider what in this day you can be grateful for?

6. On a weekly basis, perhaps before church on Sunday, or at the end of the work 
week on Friday, ask yourself, “Where did I notice the presence of Christ this 
week?”

7. Weekly, ask yourself, “What did the Holy Spirit nudge me to do or say this 
week?”
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Being intentional about discerning how to invest one’s time and energy becomes increasingly important as lifespan increases and the amount of time individuals have after retiring from paid employment expands. For those who are serving or have served the church, presumably Christians, exploring the idea of vocation or calling in retirement matters. In fact, it represents an essential task of discipleship, to actively pursue the guidance of the Holy Spirit for direction as opposed to simply defaulting to leisure activities or responding to the first or most insistent request for one’s commitment. The Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has offered holistic preretirement seminars for church workers for seventeen years and is revising these seminars to make them less clergy-centric and more accessible for those preparing to retire, both lay and clergy. This is a much-needed change.

With a new monograph on vocation in retirement (offered as chapter 5) grounded in the thinking of Martin Luther and drawing perspective from the Patristic period of the early church, this project has sought to broaden the theological base from which those offering the seminar can draw from. It provides a resource from which participants can begin or further their thinking about how God might be calling them in the next stage of their lives. Highlighting biblical narratives of call and drawing from contemporary writers on calling, both Catholic and Protestant, readers are urged to continue to seek to follow the God who calls as part of their ongoing discipleship. Being transformed by following Jesus is the core calling of our lives. This discipleship begins formally at our baptism, a sacrament of identity (along with its many and various meanings) and
continues throughout our lives. “He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ . . . In him we have redemption . . . according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us” (Eph 1:5-8). In that identity we are intended to make a difference in the world. “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” (Eph 2:10). These good works (which are a response to God’s grace, not a way of earning God’s favor) are to be our way of life. Not a means of a livelihood, or something we put away when we become eligible for Social Security, but an integral aspect of how we live as we are being transformed more and more into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18).

The church is the context in which we can continue to seek God’s calling, and be aided in that process by the community, a community of calling in which we help one another to be attentive to God’s voice in our lives. There is a need and a role for retirees in the Church, but as guides, encouragers, and mentors, not as critics of the music or keepers of the budgetary purse-strings. For the church to function optimally in this capacity it must be a community of all ages. This allows the young and old to have access to wise guides and potential mentors with whom they can navigate the complexities of following Jesus in successive stages of life and various roles and vocations.

This process of discipleship need not end as one ages, rather it can and should continue to deepen, marked by a growing relationship with God, an increasing commitment to God’s people, and an ongoing involvement in God’s work in the world. These three progressive commitments will be proclaimed by one’s life and evident in one’s death. Perhaps the clearest example of a calling lived out even in death that I have had the privilege to witness was the life and death of Steve Hayner. Pastor, President of
InterVarsity, President of Columbia Seminary, Steve lived a life of profound joy. The joy was not taken away by a terminal diagnosis. Steve and his wife Sharol graciously allowed their Caring Bridge entries from the last year of Steve’s life to be published and in so doing left a legacy of joy and a deepened understanding of calling. In an entry titled “Cancer and Calling,” Steve wrote,

All life on planet earth is terminal, and while we can certainly contribute to our own well-being in amazing ways, none of us is ultimately in control. One day, my life will be swallowed up by Life. And for today, I am choosing truth, joy and love wherever and however I can. I am resolute in my desire to learn, to fulfill my calling and to engage each day with as much joy as I am graciously given or can borrow.31

Steve Hayner finished strong. His and Sharol’s faithfulness, vulnerability, and gracious determination to continue to seek God in the midst of the awful reality of cancer were a ministry to thousands around the world. They were, in the words of Mark Labberton, a “profound witness . . . of lives largely free of entitlement or presumption, of people with grateful hearts filled by God’s resurrection life and set free for the honest adventure of hearing and following the call to follow Jesus and, in the midst of all else, to find life even in death.”32 One’s calling really can be completed in death. As one is transformed more and more into the image of Christ, how he or she lives—and especially when death is expected—how she or he approaches the end is a witness to the depth of their discipleship. A life lived following Jesus can be transformative for the lives of others as well.


APPENDIX A

Opening Worship—Day One

Call to Worship *(responsively)*

*Leader:*  
*People:*

Lord, Open unto me—
Light for my darkness.
Open unto me—
Courage for my fear.
Open unto me—
Hope for my despair.
Open unto me—
Peace for my turmoil.
Open unto me—
Joy for my strength.
Open unto me—
Strength for my weakness.
Open unto me—
Wisdom for my confusion.
Open unto me—
Forgiveness for my sins.
Open unto me—
Love for my hates.
Open unto me—
Thy Self for my self.

*All:* Lord, Lord, open unto me! Amen.

—Howard Thurman (1900-1981)

Hymn  
*Morning Has Broken*  
PH 469/GtG 664

Prayer of Confession *(unison)*

O God Our Creator, we thank you that you have led us into the light. We thank you for sending the Savior to call us from death to life. Like the rest of your creation, we are created to glorify you and love you with all of our being. You have redeemed us in Jesus that we might represent your kingdom in the world. But we confess, that old habits and old ways of living still linger, and we feel helpless to live the new life that Christ calls us to live. Give us strength, O Father, to break the bonds; give us courage to live a new life in you; give us faith to believe that with your help we cannot fail. All this we ask in the name of the Savior who has taught us to come to you.

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225 Hymns can be found in either or both as noted:


226 Greg Buell, “Prayer of Confession” from the Worship Bulletin of The Village Presbyterian Church. (Northbrook, IL: June 30, 2019).
Assurance

*Leader:* The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God’s mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness! (Lam 3:22)

Prayer for Illumination (*extemporaneous and brief*)

Scripture: 1 Sam. 3:1-11, 19 or Luke 1:26-38

Brief Meditation

(*Likely themes to include: God as one who calls; the importance of hearing and listening; the uncomfortable/awkwardness of what Samuel/Mary is asked to do [see esp. 1 Sam 3:12-21]; the ordinariness of each prior to God’s surprising call*)

Prayers of the People

In the quietness of hearts and minds, offer your praise and prayers of thanks, and remember those in need of your intercession. Offer your concerns to God for safe keeping while you are involved in this self-care event. You may share audibly any concerns for those in deep need of God’s care.

The Lord’s Prayer

Affirmation of Faith (*unison*)

*In life and in death we belong to God.*
*Through the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.*

*From: A Brief Statement of Faith*

Hymn

*Lord You Give the Great Commission*  
PH 429/GtG 298  
*OR*  
Hymn

*Lord, You have Come to the Lakeshore*  
PH 377/GtG 721

Extending the Peace of Christ

(*Closing with this element allows for transition time for seminar leadership.*)

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APPENDIX B

Closing Worship—Day One

Call to Worship

Leader: Lord, hear; Lord, forgive; Lord, do.
People: Hear what we speak not; forgive what we speak amiss; do what we leave undone; that not according to our words, or our deeds,
Leader: but according to your mercy and truth, all may work for your glory,
People: and the good of your kingdom, through Jesus Christ. Amen.
—Maria Ware (c. 1798)

Hymn Come, Great God of All the Ages PH 132/GtG 309

The Psalter (responsively) Ps 104

Leader: O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.
People: Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.
Leader: There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
People: These all look to you to give them their food in due season;
Leader: when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
People: When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
Leader: When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.
People: May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works—
Leader: who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.
All: I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord.

Hymn Come Great God of All the Ages PH 132/GtG 309

Benediction Jude 24-25 (if someone knows it invite them, otherwise read it.)
APPENDIX C

Opening Worship—Day Two

Call to Worship (unison)

O God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ:
Grant us, we pray, to be grounded and settled in your truth
by the coming down of the Holy Spirit into our hearts.
That which we know not, reveal; that which is wanting in us, fill up;
that which we know, confirm; and keep us blameless in your service;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—Patrick of Ireland (389-461)228

Hymn

Be Thou My Vision

PH 339/GtG 450

Prayer of Confession (unison)

O Lord, our Maker, you have created us in your image for your glory. Forgive us for the ways in which we have not reflected your glory or demonstrated the Kingdom of God with our lives. O Lord, our Redeemer, you have called us and saved us, that we might deny ourselves and follow you in the way of sacrificial living. Forgive us for neglecting our call by keeping to ourselves and living self-centered lives instead. O Lord, our Sustainer, by your Spirit you have empowered us to shine your light and share your love with the world around us. Forgive us for the times we have ignored our calling and your rule over our lives.229

Assurance

Leader: The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. Know that you are forgiven and be at peace.

Prayer for Illumination (extemporaneous and brief)

Scripture: Acts 9:1-9, 17-19 or Genesis 12:1-7

Brief Meditation

(Likely themes to include: God as one who calls; the importance of hearing and listening; the uncomfortable/awkwardness of what Saul/Abram & Sarai are asked to do; the ordinariness/giftedness of each prior to God’s surprising call)


229 Greg Buell, “Prayer of Confession” from the Worship Bulletin of The Village Presbyterian Church (Northbrook, IL: April 28, 2019).
Prayers of the People

In the quietness of hearts and minds, offer your praise and prayers of thanks, and remember those in need of your intercession. Offer your concerns to God for safe keeping while you are involved in this self-care event. You may share audibly any concerns for those in deep need of God’s care.

The Lord’s Prayer

Hymn  
*Today We All are Called to be Disciples*  PH 434/GtG 309

OR

Hymn  *How Clear is Our Vocation Lord?*  PH 419/GtG 432

Affirmation of Faith (unison)

*Jesus Christ, as he is attested or us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.*

From: The Theological Declaration of Barmen

Extending the Peace of Christ

*(Closing with this element allows for transition time for seminar leadership.)*

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APPENDIX D

Closing Worship—Day Two

Call to Worship

**Leader:** O God, full of compassion, I commit and commend myself to you, in whom I am, and live, and know.

**People:** Be the goal of my pilgrimage, and my rest by the way.

**Leader:** Let my soul take refuge from the crowding turmoil of worldly thought beneath the shadow of your wings.

**People:** Let my heart, this sea of restless waves, find peace in you, O God. Amen.

—Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

Hymn

**Take my Life**  
PH 391/GtG 697

**OR**

**I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry**  
GtG 488

The Psalter (responsively)

**Ps 98**

**Leader:** O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

**People:** The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

**Leader:** He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

**People:** Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

**Leader:** Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody.

**People:** With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.

**Leader:** Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it.

**All:** Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

Hymn

**God of Grace and God of Glory**  
PH 420/GtG 307

Benediction  
**The Halvorsen Benediction**

You go nowhere by accident,
Wherever you go, God is sending you,
wherever you are, God has put you there;
He has a purpose in your being there.
Christ who indwells you has something He wants to do through you
right where you are.
Believe this and go in the grace, love and power of God.

—Richard C. Halverson
APPENDIX E

Discussion Exercise

The pre-seminar reading distinguished between our “general calling” as Christians to follow Jesus, and a more “particular call” that is contextual and draws on our gifts and abilities to make a difference in the world.

On your own, reflect briefly (3-5min):

When did you first hear or first remember hearing the word “call” or “calling” in relation to your life’s work?

How is your current job part of your calling by God?

In groups of 3-5, respond to the following (10-15min):

Looking back at your career, what have you enjoyed the most? And what have you enjoyed the least? Share a story to illustrate each.232

Addressing Fears

Without relocating--on your own, reflect briefly (3-5min):

Looking ahead at the next stage of your life, what concerns do you have? Make a quick list of fears, anxieties, uncertainties etc.

What are some ways you might address these fears? Acknowledge their validity and limitations, reduce their liability if possible, resolve or eliminate those you can.

In your group, respond to the following (10-15min):

Share with the group what you’re comfortable with from your list, and your thoughts about them.

Without feeling the need to solve each other’s challenges, can you offer potential resources, ideas, affirmations to help address the fears of your colleagues?233


233 Ibid., 39-40.
Embracing Hope

On your own, reflect (5-7min):

Now release your imagination. What appeals to you about the next stage of your life? What are you most looking forward to? What interests or passions might engage your next years? What opportunities for growth? Make a list of some of what you are anticipating with eagerness. 

In groups of 3-5, share one or two possibilities from your list (10-15min):

Engaging Needs

On your own, reflect (5-7min):

Consider where you plan to live in retirement. What are the needs in that community? You might want to start a list of nonprofit and service organizations along with volunteer or entry-level positions in public service institutions like libraries, hospitals, police and fire departments. Is the area prone to natural disasters or occasional disruptions that occur with some frequency? What interests you? What makes you uncomfortable? Either might be useful to note.

In groups of 3-5, brainstorm together (10-15min):

• a list of needs in your current communities, and
• another list of benevolent organizations that need help.
(Or you might try this on your phone on your own time.)

Does this expand your awareness of possibilities for meaningful engagement in the world on behalf of your neighbor? To further God’s kingdom, how necessary is it for efforts to be connected to a church or Christian organization? In what ways might such a connection be helpful/hurtful?

Frederick Buechner famously mused about discerning God’s call that a good place to start was to consider what “you need most to do” and what “the world most needs to have done.” He concludes “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” What or where does that sound like to you?

234 Wright, The Third Third of Life, 40.

235 Buechner, “Vocation.”
APPENDIX F

Growing into Tomorrow . . . Today
Seminar Agenda

Day One

8:30 – 9:15 AM  Housekeeping, Worship, and Introductions
9:15 – 10:00 AM  Envisioning Retirement
10:00 – 10:15 AM Break
10:15 AM – 11:15 AM  Financial Planning Statements
11:15 – 12:15 AM  Employer Benefits and Social Security
12:15 – 1:30 PM  Lunch
1:30 – 2:30 PM  Retirement Income Profile
   Attendees have time and space to run their numbers with worksheets and statements
2:30 – 2:45 PM  Break
2:45 – 5:00 PM  Vocation & Identity
   1) Discernment; 2) Leaving well; 3) Navigating the transition
5:00 PM  Evening Prayer & Adjournment

Day Two

8:30 – 9:00 AM  Opening
9:00 – 9:45 AM  Balance in Retirement
9:45 – 10:00 AM Break
10:00 – 10:30 AM  Health in Retirement
10:30 – 10:45 AM Break
10:45 AM – 11:45 AM  Individual Savings
11:45 – 1:00 PM  Lunch
1:00 – 1:45 PM  Housing
1:45 – 2:30 PM  Medicare and Long-Term Care
2:30 – 2:45 PM  Break
2:45 – 3:15 PM  Journey's Next Stage
3:15 – 3:30 PM  Closing Worship & Seminar Adjournment
APPENDIX G

Interview/Discussion Questions for Staff Feedback

Interview for Staff on Monograph, Reflection Exercise, and Discussion Questions:

Monograph (Chapter 5)

Does the new monograph seem less clergy-centric than the Stotts piece, “What is Our Calling When We No Longer Have a Call?”

Is it more accessible to participants than the Stotts piece? In what ways?

Have participants in your seminars read it? What feedback have they offered (if any)?

Are you comfortable leading discussions about calling based on the participants’ reading of the monograph? More or less so than based on the Stotts piece?

Could this be a useful piece of prework to send to participants prior to THRIVE?

Reflection Exercise (following the monograph)

Describe your reaction to the exercise.

Did you find it helpful?

In what ways could it be improved?

Could this be a useful piece of prework to send to participants prior to THRIVE?

Discussion Questions (Appendix E)

How did you experience the questions?

Are they potentially valuable for inclusion in THRIVE?

How could they be improved to add value for participants in THRIVE?

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236 Stotts, “What is Our Calling When We No Longer Have a Call?”
APPENDIX H

THRIVE Participant Survey

Monograph (Chapter 5)

1. Did you have the opportunity to read the article “God is Still Calling; Are You Still Listening?”
   (If “no,” skip to the next page referring to the group discussions in the seminar.)

2. Was it helpful/useful in preparing for the THRIVE seminar?
   In what ways?

3. To what extent was the reading engaging or did you suffer through it? Circle one below:
   Suffered  Bearable  OK  Interesting  Engaging

4. What were the one or two top take-aways for you?

   What about the reflection questions woven into the article?

5. To what extent were these questions helpful or were they a waste of time? Circle one below:
   Useless  Unhelpful  OK  Helpful  Life-Changing

   Would you elaborate?

Reflection Exercise (following the monograph)

6. What was your reaction to the exercise?

7. To what extent was the exercise helpful or were they a waste of time? Circle one below:
   Useless  Unhelpful  OK  Helpful  Life-Changing

8. In what ways could it be improved?
Discussion Questions (Appendix E)

9. How did you experience the individual reflections before sharing?

10. How was your experience of the Group discussions?

11. Which was the most interesting/helpful?

12. Which was the least interesting/helpful?

13. Are they potentially valuable for inclusion in THRIVE?

14. How could they be improved to add value for participants in THRIVE?

15. To what extent was the discussion engaging or did you suffer through it? Circle one below:

   Suffered  Bearable  OK  Interesting  Engaging

16. To what extent were these helpful or were they a waste of time? Circle below:

   Useless  Unhelpful  OK  Helpful  Life-Changing

17. Would you elaborate?


Lenker, John, ed. The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther, vol 10. Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1905.


