

# Naming vocation: Five steps of student discernment

BY LILLIAN HALLSTRAND

“I don’t know what I am going to do when I finish this degree.” This troublesome comment is all too familiar to faculty and staff at graduate schools of theology, particularly from students nearing the end of their degree programs. These days, students choose to pursue this type of education for myriad reasons that don’t always include having a clear vocational plan following degree completion.

As they work with students to connect education, experience, passion, and employment, student personnel administrators at ATS member schools define *vocation* in different ways. For some, vocation has strictly a religious meaning, relating to the work to which one feels divinely called. For others, the term relates to the innate pull or preference toward certain roles or activities, or refers to the work that fits best with one’s natural gifts. Still others believe that vocation refers to the imposed meaning and significance that we place on the work that we are already doing. The one common thread is that, when thinking about theological students, vocation means something more significant than simply the job one performs in order to pay the bills.

In my role as director of stewardship and vocational planning, I am charged with assisting the graduate students at our institution with navigating their journeys of vocational discernment as well as their job search processes. Noting the separation between the career services role and the vocational discernment and planning portion of my position is important. The former involves



the more transactional roles of offering resume and cover letter critiques, and providing guidance on making application and interviewing for professional positions. The latter is the role in the process that is shared by the many faculty and staff at the institution, whether or not they realize it. Opportunities for conversations about vocational discernment and preparation present themselves frequently—in classrooms, in hallways, around lunch tables, and in one-on-one advising scenarios. Encouraging multiple professionals within a single institution to engage with students in their vocational discernment process is one of the keys to best preparing students for their postgraduation employment.

There are five steps that will help students and those who advise them to navigate vocational discernment and planning. The steps are progressive, and it is most helpful for an individual to have achieved some competency in one step before moving on to the next. In meeting with students, I recommend first identifying where they are in their process of discernment and then continuing to walk with them in their work toward employment.

## STEP 1: PERSONAL REFLECTION

This is the step where students are to spend some time developing self-awareness. The goal is for the individual to have a strong sense of identity, motivators, and the skills and abilities that come most naturally. Ask,

- What are you most passionate about?
- What are the jobs or experiences in your life that have made you come alive?
- What do you believe to be your strongest gifts, skills, and talents?

- What notions of vocational call and profession led you to pursue a graduate theological education, and how have those evolved in your time in the program?
- What practices (prayer, meditation, reflective journaling, etc.) have you incorporated into your discernment process?
- Have you had any practical experiences in the professional roles that most interest you, and if so, what did those experiences teach you?
- Based on the professions that seem most



intriguing to you, have you sought out some conversation partners among individuals who currently serve in those professional roles?

## STEP 3: AWARENESS OF OPPORTUNITIES

Once students have a better understanding of vocational direction, it is time to start doing some work to learn more about the array of options that are available to those with a theological education. The goal for this step would be for students to be able to name two or three professional roles

## STEP 2: UNDERSTANDING AND CLARIFYING CALL

Many students struggle with narrowing down broad ideas of vocation, (i.e., “I want to work with the poor;” or “I feel that God has called me to teach.”). In this step, students will do the work of narrowing down to the professions to which they feel particularly drawn or called. This would also be an ideal period in discernment for students to seek out experiences in which they “try out” some professional roles, as well as to identify some dialogue partners who are currently serving in a professional role that they may find intriguing. Ask,

that both align with their understanding of vocational calling and are positions that they will be qualified to pursue following completion of their graduate theological degree. Ask,

- What types of positions will you be eligible to apply for following the completion of this degree that align with your vocational calling?
- Are there additional requirements or steps that can be taken that will make you more competitive for these types of professional positions following graduation?

- Have you located some organizations and/or institutions that you would be interested in working with, and if so, have you engaged in conversation with individuals at those locations to learn more about employment opportunities?

## STEP 4: CHOOSING A PATH

At this point, students should have more specific ideas of the professional opportunities that both align with their sense of vocational call, experiences, and natural gifts and are likely to be available following graduation. There may be reasons for a student to remain more open to multiple potential paths (i.e., job market, geographical limitations, etc.). Remind students that choosing a particular professional path is not equivalent to a life-sentence in that profession. Trends show that job transitions are happening more frequently than ever, so the likelihood that students will spend an extensive period of time in one professional role is becoming increasingly rare.<sup>1</sup> Ask,

- Of the opportunities you have explored, which one feels like the best fit for you when considering your vocational calling, experiences, and natural gifts?
- Which of the professions you have identified do you have the most confidence in pursuing?
- Considering your professional opportunities following graduation, which feels like the best fit for the lifestyle that you hope to have (i.e., salary, work hours, etc.)?

## STEP 5: START MOVING

This final step is the point at which students begin the process of preparing and submitting applications and interviewing for professional positions. By the time they reach this step in the process, most students who have done the work of discernment feel confident and excited

<sup>1</sup> Jeanne Meister, "Job Hopping is the 'New Normal' for Millennials: Three Ways to Prevent a Human Resource Nightmare," *Forbes.com*, August 14, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2015/04/27/future-of-work-mindfulness-as-a-leadership-practice/>.

about the next chapter following their degree program. Students who have not engaged in a process of discernment and are applying to professional roles upon graduation out of necessity often seem bewildered and find the job search process much more stressful. Ask,

- Are your application materials such as resume/CV and cover letter updated and ready to be sent out to prospective employers?
- Are you regularly looking at websites to view available positions?
- Do you feel confident in your interviewing skills, or would you benefit from some practice or mock interview sessions?
- Have you determined the salary that you would require in order to manage your expenses?

## STAFFING AN EFFECTIVE DISCERNMENT PROCESS

Finally, it is never too early to start the process of vocational discernment and planning. To this end, our institution has added the new position of assistant director of admissions and vocational discernment. This professional is charged with thinking about how we can integrate opportunities for vocational discernment from the time that individuals are prospective students and throughout the admissions and enrollment process. We expect that by starting these conversations early, students will feel more competent in their discernment and planning process throughout their degree programs and will be better equipped to obtain professional employment as they commence from the institution.

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