



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

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

What do you think?

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

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Christian Reflection

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Following Our Vocation in Organizations

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

Prayer

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

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

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

Scripture Reading: Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

Reflection

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

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

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

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



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

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

Study Questions

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

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

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

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

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

Kate B. Wilkinson (1913)

Suggested Tune: ST. LEONARDS

Following Our Vocation in Organizations

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

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

Before the Group Meeting

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

Begin with Case Studies

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

Prayer

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

Scripture Reading

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

Reflection

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

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

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

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

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

Study Questions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Departing Hymn

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