

Following Our Vocation in Organizations

BY GORDON T. SMITH

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

From the first day on the job, Karl knew that teaching in this new situation would be more complicated than he'd anticipated. Sure, this school had a slightly different curriculum for its history students. And naturally, he had to learn what it meant to work with this administration and with students from a slightly different background. But the changes were much more subtle and pervasive; the entire spirit of the place was different than anywhere else he had taught. He sensed that serving at this institution would present a new challenge not merely to his teaching but also to what it meant to be a colleague to his fellow faculty members.

In contrast, Rachel assumed that if she knew how to do computer programming, then a job was a job was a job; and she could do it anywhere. But after she made the jump to a new company, attracted by the salary and the easier commute, it was only a matter of weeks before she realized that her previous employer was a company where she felt at home. She missed the tone of the office and the camaraderie with her fellow programmers that she deeply valued. In her previous workplace, she had appreciated the way that decisions were made and that her perspective was always taken seriously in decisions that affected her work. Frankly, now she regretted her shortsightedness in making the move.

After Stan left a small-town church and accepted the call to pastor a congregation in the inner city of a large metropolis, he recognized the need

for major adjustments in the way he fulfilled his vocation. He could not simply import a vision of congregational life and witness; rather, to be an effective leader, he would have to learn its unique identity, character, and mission.

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. If they are to live out God’s call, they must appreciate the interplay of their personal sense of vocation with those of the organizations and communities around them. 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.

OPPORTUNITIES OR ROADBLOCKS

We live in regular intersection with many organizations, which are collectives coordinated toward common ends. They give meaning to our lives by leveraging our talents and abilities in partnership with others to achieve social goals that matter to us. Because the impact of their collective efforts may be far greater than the sum of the parts, businesses where we work and associations where we volunteer can provide us with opportunities for generous service.

This is noteworthy because it helps to resolve a tension inherent in the Christian notion of vocation. “The place God calls you to,” Frederick Buechner famously says in defining *vocation*, “is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”¹ On the one hand, our work should be more than just a job; it should resonate with our inmost longings and aspirations. But the Christian idea of vocation also includes God’s call to generous, sacrificial service—to take up our cross and follow Christ. In this sense, we are called to give up ourselves—even our personal longings and aspirations—for the sake of others. No wonder that, as Christians, we experience a tension within our complex calling both to be true to ourselves and to give ourselves in generous service. Greg Jones suggests that we can best manage this polarity by examining each organization where we are invited to serve and seeking congruence between the institution’s vocation and our personal call.² When the organization’s vocation is fitting to our own, it can provide us with opportunities not only to exercise our gifts and passions, but also to be of genuine and generous service to others. In this way, organizations hold the promise that our work both be congruent with our identity and deepest joy, and enable us to make a difference for good.

Of course, we should be wary of the ways that some organizations sap the human spirit, foster the abuse of power and persons, and cultivate a pattern of work or approach to life that goes against our divine vocation. And even within a fine organization, what is good for one person is not

necessarily good for another; a position that for one person is an opportunity for generous service may be for another an unbearable cross.

Thus we should approach our participation in these collectives with not only a generous spirit but also a discerning heart. The process of our discernment—asking how we are called to fulfill our vocation in light of the collective vocations of organizations and institutions—requires considering

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our life stage and developing the capacities that enable us to navigate vocational transitions well.

STAGES OF LIFE

Our stage of adult life—young, middle, or senior adulthood—is a primary factor in how we relate to organizations. While the passages of adult life are surely more

complex than this three-fold distinction, this is a good place to begin, as long as we do not specify particular ages. We all pass through these transitions, but at different ages and at a different pace.

Young people frequently approach organizations as opportunities for learning and self-discovery. It is very tempting for a college graduate to look to organizations entirely as a venue for career advancement, as a way to “get ahead,” by making the right connections and establishing the very best possible resumé.

At its worst, this is nothing short of opportunism. And even some Christians never grow out of this propensity to see organizations as nothing but a means to a narrow end—the advancement of their own personal careers. When we observe it in young people, we hope that in time they will come to a more mature perspective. But when we see it in midlife, we recognize it for what it is—a pitiful self-aggrandizement.

But at its best, this perspective highlights the reality that as young persons we really have only a limited sense of self and vocation. And so these early years are an opportunity to foster self-knowledge and learning; we learn on the job about ourselves, others, and the world. When I took on my first pastorate coming out of seminary, I undoubtedly had a particular vision for the good that would be accomplished through my ministry. But in the end it became clear that I was the primary beneficiary of those few years, for I learned a great deal about myself and the way a congregation manages to be the Body of Christ.

In middle adulthood, though, our relationship to organizations calls for a different perspective. Midlife is ideally marked by a healthy view of our-

selves, including 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. Thus the ideal is to 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. A writer longs for the right publisher, a teacher seeks the school that most fits his vision of education, or a person in business looks to starting or finding a company that best represents her vision of commerce. What we desire during middle adulthood is not so much our personal advancement, but participation in an organization with a mission that represents our values and a vision that captures our attention, a collective enterprise that is worthy of the investment of our energies. To put it differently, what marks midlife is the resolve to invest our energies in an organization where we can leverage our skills, in partnership with others, to accomplish something that really matters. We make a difference as we work with other people, using our abilities and talents in ways that complement the skills of others. Knowing our limitations as well as abilities, we celebrate the skills of others, for it is the capacities of others that make our own abilities meaningful and effective.

Then in our senior years we realize that power and influence are not identical, and often are not even linked. For all the significance of organizations as vehicles for positive impact, including their necessity for civilization, they are only temporal. Power within them is meaningful and significant, but also transitory and ephemeral. The older we get, the more we appreciate that our vocations are not linked as closely to the organizations that once meant so much to us. So we “retire.” 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.

NEGOTIATING ORGANIZATIONS

The interplay between personal and organizational vocation changes over time, through the transitions of our lives and the unfolding of our vocations. Along the way we will need many skills—such as *reading* an organization, gaining a *gracious differentiation* from it, and maintaining a *kingdom perspective* on its goals—in order to work well in partnership with others within organizations.

Our capacity to thrive within an organization is dependent on our *ability to read an organization*—to discern the vocation of a business, government agency, church, or non-profit institution. The language of “charism,” prominent in recent thinking about religious orders within the Roman Catholic Church, is particularly helpful here. Vatican II urged each religious order or society to rethink its identity through a consideration of its original charism, or gift of the Spirit through which it had been founded. Since

each religious order represents a distinct way in which God has chosen to gift the church and the world, it could find clarity of mission and organizational renewal by living reflectively in the light of its founding charism.

I am struck that this perspective can help us think about virtually every organization, by asking, “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?” Discerning charism is a matter of attending to an organization’s true mission and defining values. We consider the charism not because we hope to impose our vision or values on the organization, but as a way of recognizing that this organization has a life which began before we were on the scene and will continue after we have moved on or retired. Since our opportunity to make a difference to an organization lies, in large measure, in our resolve to embrace this larger agenda, we contribute most effectively when we attend to an organization’s fundamental charism.

Discerning an organization’s *true* mission and values, of course, is rarely as simple as reading its vision statement and studying its latest bulletin or quarterly report. 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. Perhaps the published vision statement is out of date or irrelevant to new tasks; maybe it was written merely for “window dressing” and public relations all along. An organization can become tired and wandering, or self-deceived, or even hypocritical about its vision, and in these cases we may need considerable insight and subtlety of observation to discern its charism.

There is no such thing as a generic school or church or business. Each has a distinctive identity—a mission and a set of defining values—that is its driving energy, its reason for being. In our early adult years we explore the organizations in which we invest our energies—discovering how their values shape patterns of work and community, and how their missions are adapted, sometimes faithfully or not, within a changing environment. In midlife the stakes become higher, for we desire our personal vocation to be in significant alignment with the mission and values of the organization where we serve. Only when our vision of life and work resonates with the organization’s mission can we effectively employ our abilities, in partnership with others, toward important goals that are greater than any of us can accomplish alone.

A second key capacity is *gaining a gracious differentiation* from an organization. For the concept of “differentiation” we are indebted to family systems theory, particularly Edwin Friedman’s masterful study, *Generation to Generation*, which so ably articulates what it means to be an individual within family and organizational systems.³ Friedman warns that individuals can be inordinately influenced and unwittingly burdened by a diseased “system” of a family or organization. The only way to preserve personal

vocational integrity within a distorted system is to maintain a distinction between our selves and the organization—an otherness wherein our personal identity and vocation is never wholly subsumed and controlled by the organization.

There is, then, the need to sustain a gracious differentiation in which we are committed to a community and give ourselves in sacrificial service to the cause articulated in its mission, yet also affirm that we are distinct from this organization. We are never so identified by a role within the community that no one thinks of us except as part of the organization, and that we cannot conceive of ourselves except as part of the organization.

Differentiation allows us to sustain a sense of our own call within and beyond the organization. Only then can we have the courage to resign and move on from the organization when this might be required. 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. But organizations change. Their needs may change in a way that indicates it is time for us to contribute our time and ability elsewhere. The very effectiveness of a pastor, for example, might mean that the congregation has developed in a way that calls for a different set of strengths or capacities in pastoral leadership; moving on, in this case, would be a sign of success, not failure. But such a move for the sake of the organization is only possible if we recognize that our identity, mission, and vocation are distinct from the organization. This recognition is vital to the well-being of the organization as well as the long-term fulfillment of our personal vocation.

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. This differentiation empowers us in such a way that the work we do is our work; we may do it for others and in partnership with others in an organization, but it is always *our* work.

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Only with a healthy sense of “otherness” will we be able to both succeed and fail in our early adult years, and truly see our involvement in an organization as an opportunity for learning and development. Only then, whether as young or mid-career adults, will a work-related evaluation be an opportunity for growth that neither inflates our egos (if it is a positive evaluation) nor crushes our spirits (if it is negative).

And then, of course, only when we sustain a healthy differentiation will we be able to retire from our career with grace and strength. Only if we are “other” than the business or ministry we enjoyed over the years, can we stand back and actually have greater influence than we had within an organization.

As Christians it is vital that we cultivate yet another capacity for managing the interplay of personal and organizational vocation, that of *maintaining a kingdom perspective* on institutions. I have in mind here two things: first, that the small is often more significant than the large and prominent; and, second, that the work done in obscurity and “in secret” (beyond the notice and attention of others) is often more significant than that which happens in public (in the notice and with the affirmation of others).

We are too easily caught up in thinking that very large or high profile organizations are more significant for our attention and worthy of our endorsement. But a kingdom perspective on organizations reminds us that often it is the work of smaller, less noticed movements that have the greatest impact over time. This is not to discount the value of larger schools, churches, or businesses. It is merely to affirm that God often calls his people into work that is seemingly obscure and marginal. So we will be wise 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.

A kingdom perspective on vocation reminds us that our accomplishments within organizations have integrity just when all that we do, both the noticed and the “behind the scenes” work, is done in response to God’s call and enabling. 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. We bear responsibility because it is, when all is said and done, *our* work, and not merely the product of an organization.

CONCLUSION

Any conversation about vocation, work, and career inevitably leads us to examine the organizations of which we are a part. I have been suggesting that this examination be guided by two defining factors: first, by where

we are in our own adult development, because we relate to organizations differently through the phases of life and work; and second, by the cultivation of the critical skills that enable us to fulfill our vocation within organizations.

We need to be able to “read” corporations, churches, guilds, and societies to discern the vision and values that shape them; I called this discovering the organization’s charism. Hopefully there will be a happy fit between the corporate mission and what God has called us to do; in this case, the organization can provide us with immense opportunities for service. Some organizations may actually pull against our divine vocation, however. Therefore, we must maintain a wholesome differentiation of ourselves from the organization that 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. Because our ultimate loyalty is to God’s kingdom, we can maintain a proper perspective on the significance of organizations and our work within them.

NOTES

1 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 118.

2 L. Gregory Jones, “Negotiating the Tensions of Vocation,” in *The Scope of our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, edited by L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 220.

3 See particularly Chapter 8, “Family Process and Organizational Life,” Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985).



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