



How Might Colleges Help in the Discernment of Vocation

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For the first time in my life I am working a fifty-hour week and understanding what it feels like to work hard all day, travel home, eat dinner, watch the news, grocery shop, sleep, and then wake up and do it all over the next day. I must admit that working full time and no longer enjoying the flexible schedule and frequent breaks of the academic calendar has been an adjustment. At age twenty-six, I find myself humbled and terrified by the significant portion of a person's life spent working in our society. What I am quickly realizing is how truly important it is to enjoy and find meaning in the work you choose.

I recently attended my five-year college reunion at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. The interactions were typical for a reunion of young adults in that we primarily shared about our careers. Most shared that they are working as teachers, lawyers, bankers, and retail managers. When I shared that I am in ministry and that I was working as a hospital chaplain, the majority of my classmates seemed shocked and somewhat uncomfortable. Several people shared with me that evening that I am the only person they know who chose ministry as a vocation. None of my high school or college friends even considered going into ministry. In fact, neither had I. I was raised in a business-oriented family. My father ran a candy company. My mother is a self-employed attorney. My brother is a Certified Public Accountant. I grew up working in the candy stores and soon realized that good business sense was in my blood. It seemed natural that I major in Business Administration for my college degree.

I don't believe it was a coincidence that I concentrated my major in the direction of management—the people side of business. Anything dealing with leadership, group work, interpersonal dynamics, and motivating others caught my attention. However, during my college years, I still wasn't consciously aware of my passion and love for people, which would eventually lead me into ministry.

Studying abroad in Cheltenham, England, for the second semester of my junior year was a significant turning point in my life. For the first time I lived outside the United States and became aware of the limited and biased perspective I had on the world. I traveled extensively and met persons who were very different from anyone I had previously known. It was during that semester abroad that I acquired a more global understanding and realized that not every society shares the values and norms I grew up with in the

United States. I will never forget the day that my English marketing professor called on me in order to make a point. Being the only American in an all-English classroom, he asked me to share with the class how many rooms and telephones existed in the house where I grew up. When I reluctantly admitted to the class that my house had sixteen rooms and seven telephones, a roar of laughter filled the room. The material over-consumption of the United States was the message I took home loud and clear that day. I was learning that there is another way.

I returned to my senior year with a new perspective. The common desire to get a corporate job after college and begin working my way up the ladder of success had lost its appeal. I craved to break free from the norm. In hindsight, I believe God was calling me to break free.

I decided to spend a year in Brethren Volunteer Service. Thus began my pattern of choosing paths I promised myself I would never choose. While my family and Church of the Brethren friends had long been pointing out the value of a year of volunteer work, I resisted the idea until my senior year. Eventually, the restlessness I felt about the corporate world led me to a clear decision to enter Brethren Volunteer Service (B.V.S.).

Based at the denominational offices of the Church of the Brethren in Elgin, Illinois, I spent the year as a National Workcamp Co-Coordinator. My position involved setting up experiences around the country and in Central America for youth to serve others, live in a new culture, and learn about putting one's faith in action. I was exposed to poverty and injustice that I had never before comprehended. My year in B.V.S. was a tremendous learning experience not only because of the work but also because personally, it was the most difficult year of my life. My forty-eight year old father was killed in an accident during the second week of my B.V.S. orientation. My entire world was turned upside down within a matter of minutes. Suddenly, the world no longer made sense to me and I felt forsaken by God.

The year was filled with the most acute pain and grief I've ever known. My inner core was devastated and I longed to find meaning, a sense of control, and anything that made sense. I had so many questions. I asked, Why? I asked, Where is God? I asked, How will I ever live through the pain? While I was convinced that I had lost my faith, several people shared with me that they were touched by the depth of my faith. I didn't understand. Today, I look back and understand. I wasn't doubting God's existence. Rather, I was wrestling with God just as Jacob did the night before he was reunited with Esau. My heart was so broken and stripped that I became the most open and vulnerable to God that I had ever been. Like Jacob, it felt as though I had seen God face to face. By facing the grief directly and eventually finding hope and healing, I began to experience transformation. I no longer felt afraid of devastating pain and I felt comfortable being with others in their pain. In fact, I became drawn to those who were hurting. I gained a new-found courage to enter into the experience of suffering with others because I had faith and hope that they too would find their way through the pain.

This newly realized passion on behalf of hurting people and the desire to ask questions about faith led me to seminary, another path I promised myself I would never take. My supervisor and mentor during B.V.S. was an ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren. She gently (and not so gently) encouraged me to consider seminary because she saw gifts in me for ministry. At age twenty-two, this was the first time that someone clearly recognized my gifts for ministry and encouraged me to pursue seminary.

Studying at Bethany Theological Seminary was a life-changing experience for me. Whereas my business classes at Elizabethtown College involved significant memorization, tests, and answering correctly, seminary stretched the other side of my brain. I was challenged to live in the questions, think critically, and articulate my own thoughts and beliefs. I am pleased with the education I received at both institutions.

I previously worked as a chaplain through a Clinical Pastoral Education residency at Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, D.C. I visited patients on a daily basis and offered them spiritual and emotional support as they experienced crisis and loss. I often felt honored to be with people in their time of need. One afternoon while I was on call at the hospital, I received a request to visit a patient who was actively dying. When I entered the room, the patient's sisters, niece, and daughters were present. We gathered around the bed, held hands, prayed aloud, and sang hymns as the patient took her last breath. She was surrounded by the love of God and of her family. It was indeed an experience of being on holy ground and one that I will not forget. It is at moments such as these that I know ministry is exactly what I want and feel called to do. I feel an inner peace and satisfaction in knowing that at such a young age, I have found the vocational path that God has called me to.

As I visited with my Elizabethtown College classmates during our five-year reunion, I found myself wondering what role faith plays in the lives and vocational choices of those I once considered good friends. Do they look to their faith in times of discernment and life-defining decision making? Do they understand their work choices in terms of a sense of calling or vocation? Did our college experience encourage such discernment?

My friends and I rarely, if ever, talked about our faith while we were in college. Few attended worship services on a regular basis. Faith, religion, God, and spirituality were topics we never brought to the surface. I am intrigued by this, considering the fact that I was active in Church of the Brethren denominational activities and gatherings throughout my college years. While I did not attend worship on a regular basis, to some extent I recognized and valued the spiritual centeredness I felt upon returning from church retreats and conferences. However, I doubt that I could have articulated these experiences at the time.

Maybe I didn't know how to talk about my faith. Maybe I was hesitant to in admit the importance of my faith. Maybe I didn't make my faith a priority. Maybe I didn't take my faith very seriously. Maybe I could have greatly

benefited from intentional guidance, facilitation, and encouragement to integrate my faith with the choices that I was making. But is it the responsibility of an educational institution to develop faith-based discernment among its students? Isn't that the role of the church? I believe that both colleges—particularly those representing a religious tradition such as the Church of the Brethren—and churches can support and encourage young people in this arena. The question is: How does a college or university guide its students in working out the relationship between their faith commitments and their intellectual development and vocational choices?

As I think about how college communities can encourage students to make decisions in light of their faith, many ideas come to mind. Some of the ideas are simple and would be easy to implement. Others are more complex and would involve a great deal of discernment and resources.

- Many colleges and universities have a career counseling center. Resources available to students typically include personality tests, job opportunities, interview scheduling, career counseling, and resume workshops. Adding to these resources, the opportunity for students to speak with a spiritual director, ordained minister, or pastoral counselor could significantly integrate the faith dimension into a student's vocational decision-making process.
- Encourage students to cultivate their faith while in college. This alone could significantly add to the integration of faith, decision-making, and everyday life. Invite students to participate in weekly worship by organizing transportation and distributing a descriptive list of local worship opportunities. Develop an on-campus worship experience that is inspired and led by students with the freedom to explore styles of worship that speak particularly well to their age and stage in life. Organize and facilitate weekly spirituality groups for students to share about their faith through their own experiences and feelings. Offer or encourage participation in spiritual retreats several times a year through which students may take time to reflect on their lives and the role that faith plays in their discernment processes.
- I am familiar with a campus ministry program that includes a resource known as Chaplains in Residence. In each dormitory lives one minister/chaplain who works full time at the school or elsewhere. In exchange for housing and a small stipend, the minister makes her- or himself available to the students in the evenings and on weekends. The chaplain in residence is not a disciplinary figure. Rather, he or she is available to students for pastoral care, crisis intervention, and spiritual guidance.
- Provide opportunities for students to have at least one cross-cultural experience. Brethren Colleges Abroad is a wonderful program for studying in various parts of the world. Other opportunities to learn about a different way of life include workcamps and travel seminars. Experiences such as these are often life-changing and faith maturing.

- Invite ministers to participate in career fairs and to speak at college gatherings. Exposing students to ministers of various ages, religious traditions, ethnicity, and gender helps diminish the stereotype that all ministers are Caucasian men in their fifties. Presenting the wide scope of ministry opportunities, including chaplaincy, social justice work, ecumenical ministry, and missionary work, would help students understand that there are many forms ministry can take. Serving as a pastor in a congregation is only one model.
- At the institutional level, the college or university itself can model faith-based decision-making. When staff and faculty listen acutely for God's guidance and honor the rich traditions and emphases of the Church of the Brethren (such as simple living, peace, and community) in the midst of discernment and goal setting they invite students to do the same.

I am not suggesting that faith or religion be forced on any student. The Church of the Brethren has long proclaimed that there should be no force in religion. Rather, I am suggesting that if colleges provide support and opportunities such as those mentioned above they could significantly enrich their students' ability and desire to integrate their faith into their life. Because the college years are typically the time when vocational decisions are made, this process of faith integration couldn't come at a more important time. I was blessed to have a strong faith community to support me during my vocational decision making. Unfortunately, not everyone has a faith community to guide their discernment. How valuable it would be if the college and university environment could offer to its students opportunities for cultivating their faith and making vocational choices that are congruent with their beliefs and personhood.

While I may complain about fifty-hour work weeks and taking paths I promised I would never take, I am happy. And I hold sacred the peace I feel in knowing that God is fully at work in my life and in my ministry. May every student who studies at a Church of the Brethren institution be given ample opportunities to find a path toward the peace and happiness that only God can give.



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