

(HOW)  
IS GOD  
CALLING  
?

the holy work of reflection and discernment

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This is a discernment toolkit provided by ELCA Seminaries for campus ministries and young adults. It was made possible by the Richard. H. Barkalow fund managed by Thrivent Impact & Investing.



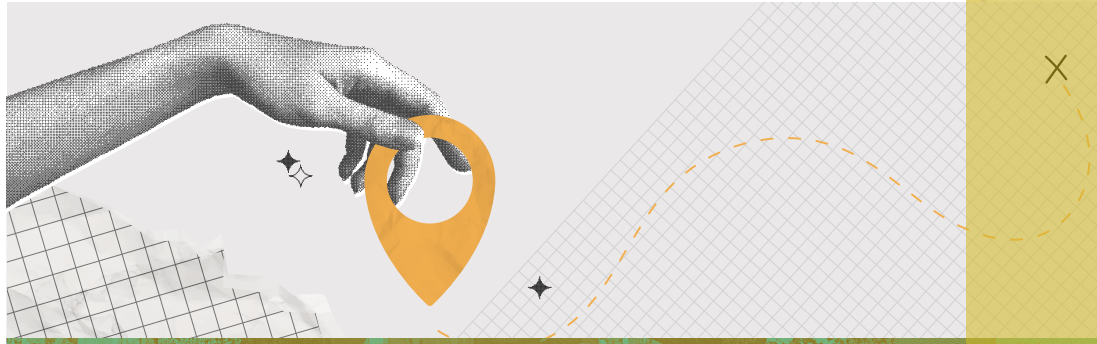
## 2

# Lutherans & Vocation

**In the Lutheran Understanding of vocation** calling does not necessarily equal career, and it certainly doesn't only mean career. We are whole people and are called in our fullness. This means that vocational discernment is about one's whole life, not just a piece of it. Vocation and discernment have deep roots in Lutheran traditions. It can be valuable to explore these roots and the ways that Lutheran understandings of vocation continue to counter some mainstream cultural narratives.

### **Our Goals:**

- 💡 introduce some key elements in the Lutheran understanding of vocation, note how they are sometimes at odds with contemporary (US) culture
- 💞 explore the connection between baptism and vocational calling
- 🗨️ engage in reflection on one's own sense of calling



# Background

## Martin's Flaws & Lutheranism Today

Though named after Martin Luther, Lutheranism does not belong to one person, one time, or one voice

Although rooted in the theology of Martin Luther, Lutheranism extends far beyond any single person. When speaking of Luther, it is important to acknowledge that he was deeply flawed. Some of his writings and teachings caused real harm, particularly his anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim statements, which the ELCA has clearly and publicly denounced. We can learn from Luther without excusing his failures, and we can engage his theology without venerating or idolizing him. This framing is important as we move into sections that draw on Luther's theological insights, critiques, and practices.



### **Facilitator Suggestion:**

If you're engaging with this content over multiple sessions, divide it up to go deeper. Similar to the previous section, this would work for a retreat, sermon series, or multiple session group conversation. Choose what seems most appropriate for your context and community.



# Opening Session

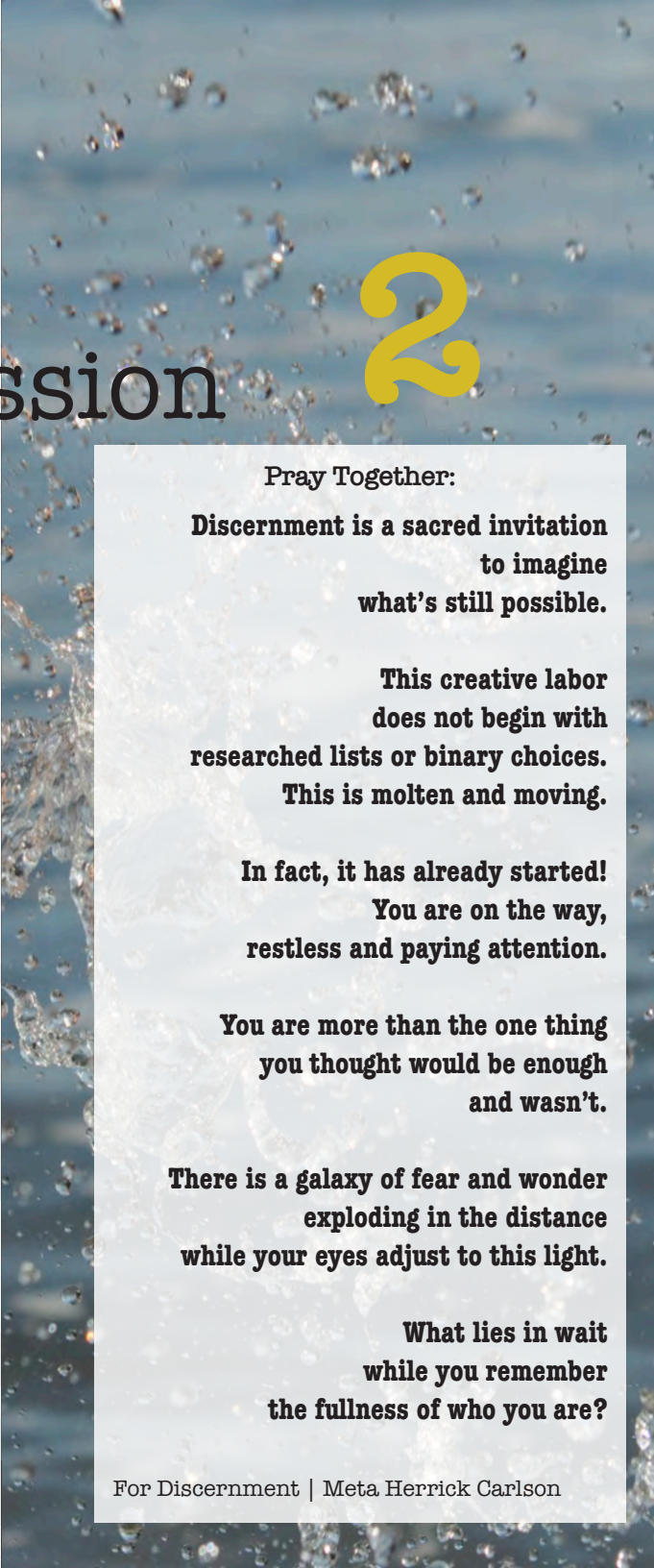
# 1

## Opening Practice: Visio Divina

Visio Divina (“divine seeing”) is a contemplative practice involving a picture, image, icon, etc. Similar to Lectio Divina, it is a way of slowing down and attending to God’s presence and action within us.

☞ See pg. 67 for a step by step guide to lead this practice

Adjust this session to your needs and time. You could skip Visio Divina, and spend more time on For Discernment, or just ready For Discernment as an opening prayer. The Discussion Questions could be used for group discussion or individual journaling following the prayer.



# 2

Pray Together:

**Discernment is a sacred invitation to imagine what’s still possible.**

**This creative labor does not begin with researched lists or binary choices. This is molten and moving.**

**In fact, it has already started! You are on the way, restless and paying attention.**

**You are more than the one thing you thought would be enough and wasn’t.**

**There is a galaxy of fear and wonder exploding in the distance while your eyes adjust to this light.**

**What lies in wait while you remember the fullness of who you are?**

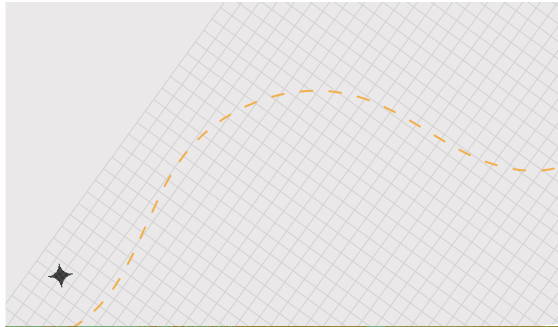
For Discernment | Meta Herrick Carlson

# 3

## Possible Discussion Questions

- What word or phrase stuck out to you and why?
- “This is molten and moving...in fact it has already started!” Discernment is an ongoing process that often begins even before we know it. What feels molten and moving or already started in your own process of discernment?
- “You are on the way, restless and paying attention.” Do you agree that “you are on the way”? What does that look like in your life? Can you identify a restlessness in you? What might it be telling you? What is catching your attention recently with regard to discerning vocation?
- “You are more than the one thing you thought would be enough and wasn’t.” Where does this phrase land for you? Have you had this experience?
- “There is a galaxy of fear and wonder exploding in the distance while your eyes adjust to this light.” Where do you experience fear when you think about discerning your callings? Where do you feel wonder in this discernment? Why?

💡 Spend some time journaling and then, in conversation together, responding to Carlson’s last question: **What lies in wait while you remember the fullness of who you are?**



I wonder...

Baptism is a place where Lutherans articulate God's call on each of us, as our original and primary vocation.

- What stands out to you in these words as foundational for a Lutheran understanding of vocation?
- What stands out to you in the response portion of this affirmation?

Example responses:

*Community is a fundamental part of faith. (What does it mean to live among God's faithful people?)*

*There's receiving (the word, the meal) and giving (serving others, striving for justice and peace).*

*There is a Yes (consent) and recognition that we can't do it alone. We say we need God's help and guidance.*

- Where do you feel like you are living up to these baptismal commitments? Why? What might you prioritize or adjust to respond more fully to these baptismal callings?

# Vocation in Baptism

## Vocational Calling in Baptism

Individual Baptisms are celebrated as part of Lutheran worship. We also engage in a ritual called Affirmation of Baptism at various times of the year.

To begin thinking about the foundations of a Lutheran understanding of calling and vocation, get a hymnal and take a look at the Affirmation of Baptism.



*The Affirmation of Baptism is found in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal (ELW) on pages 234-237*

This is a public profession of faith ( pg. 235-236). After the profession of faith, notice these words, and their responses



**Do you** intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:

to live among God's faithful people;  
to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper;  
to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed;  
to serve all people following the example of Jesus;  
and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?"

**Responses:**

**I do,** and I ask God to help and guide me

**We do,** and we ask God to help and guide us

 **FACILITATOR SUGGESTION:**

**Invite a few participants to share their baptismal story or about a baptism they have witnessed. Keep in mind not everyone may be baptized, so don't assume that everyone will have a story to share. Name that reality aloud and normalize that people come to faith in a variety of ways.**



# Key Elements in Lutheran Vocation

## Element 1: Vocation Is For All

In Luther's time, religious people (priests, nuns, monks) had a vocation. Others had callings necessary for society to function, but these were not seen as important or as pleasing to God. These callings were second class.



*Note: this is a reflection of Roman Catholicism in Luther's era. It is not how contemporary Roman Catholicism understands vocation.*

Luther really shifted this understanding based on the idea that all the world is God's (not just the "religious world") and that all people are made in the image of God, and therefore are valuable. Because of this, all serve as ministers in whatever their context, and their vocational contributions are valuable. Luther challenges the idea of a hierarchy of vocations.

There are varieties of gifts, but all gifts from God are valuable and all vocations are valuable. This, of course, is often not how our society functions!

One of the critiques of vocation is that it's elitist and some people just have to earn a living or survive. But within the value that vocation is for all is the assertion that vocation is fundamental to how we live. It's not just for the elite and privileged. Having time to reflect on vocation may be a privilege, but all people have vocations.

A common concern about Luther's understanding of vocation is that it might preserve the status quo. "If it's all divine work, then you should just stay in your 'place' and like it."

**Vocation is not an excuse for injustice!**

This understanding is not to be used as a way to put or keep people "in their place" (i.e. "your minimum wage job is your vocation and because all vocations are valuable, you should just stay there.") One can do good there, and there might also be a calling to justice work for fair treatment, higher wages, or even a new position.

Luther's understanding of vocation does not prevent the minimum wage worker from taking another job or working to improve conditions at that job or pursuing more education. But **it does prevent others from looking down on someone's work or seeing it as less valuable.**

I worked with unhoused youth in Chicago and knew a woman everyone just called "mama." She struggled with mental health and addiction, housing insecurity, and was in and out of jail. And, she had a calling. She was the mama of the block, helping new young folks figure out how to survive on the street. She organized the community, set rules and norms, and looked out for everyone. She had a calling as mama even though she never heard the word vocation or spent time reflecting on the theology of calling!

Rev. Jen Rude | Pacific Lutheran University

# Key Elements in Lutheran Vocation

## Element 1: continued

### Priesthood of all Believers

Lutherans talk about the priesthood of all believers, rooted in the theology of Martin Luther.

Other ways this is talked about include universal priesthood or the priesthood of the baptized. In this understanding, the baptized faithful are all ministers of the gospel and called to serve others. While some are called to the office of ordained ministry, every Christian is a priest, a minister.



NOTES



## Reflection Questions

- Where/how do you see a hierarchy of vocations in the U.S. and/or in other relevant cultural contexts?
- Do you agree that everyone has a vocation?
- Have you thought about calling or vocation as a privilege before?
- How do you think about the tension between all vocations being valuable and the reality that in our society this is often not the case? Where do you witness this discrepancy most?
- What does it mean to consider a vocation valuable?
- Have you understood yourself as a minister before?
- If you agree with Luther, that you are a minister, what kind of ministry might you be called to?
- What is something you felt called to do that came with a sacrifice or cost?

# Key Elements in Lutheran Vocation

## Element 2: Vocation Serves Neighbors

Serving fellow people, creation, and communities

A lot of pop culture messaging is around following your bliss, passion, happiness, or, doing whatever you can to make the most money. Passion and happiness might be a helpful part of reflecting on your own calling, and earning a living is essential for survival in our economy. There is nothing wrong with these values, but it is critical to a Lutheran understanding that our vocation is of service to fellow humans and the earth. Vocation is to be of service beyond yourself.

To paraphrase a Luther-ism, "God doesn't need our good works, but our neighbor does." Serving is not about getting in good with God or earning God's love. Loving and serving our neighbor is God's desire and expectation of us. And it is through God's grace and love that we are able to serve.

Because vocation is outward-oriented, vocation can have a cost. Vocations are not always comfortable or safe and sometimes vocation requires sacrifice. Think about parents suffering from sleeplessness with a newborn, a student who has to say no to a party to study for an exam, or caring for a sibling who needs extra help. Some may be called to accompany their loved one through illness or even death. This is not necessarily doing what makes them happy, but it is meaningful and a vocational calling that serves others.

The place God calls  
you to is the place where  
your deep gladness and  
the world's deep hunger meet

-Frederick Beuchner

### Reflect:

- What do you think Beuchner meant by gladness?
- How might this be different from "do what makes you happy"?

### Remember:

"God doesn't need  
our good works,  
but our neighbor does."

-Martin Luther

Love



### Watch & Discuss:

[When Everybody Abandoned Elderly Residents, They STEPPED UP!](#)

Watch this two minute StoryCorps/Upworthy video about an assisted living facility that abruptly closed and how two individuals responded. Share your responses to the story.

### Reflection Questions:

- How do you think Miguel and Maurice discerned their response in this situation?
- How do you think Miguel's childhood experience contributed to his decision in this circumstance? Are there life experiences you've had that influence how you show up in the world and/or how you share time, energy, or resources?

# Key Elements in Lutheran Vocation

## Element 3: Vocations (1 of 2)

It's plural, y'all

Because God operates in all spheres of life, **vocations** involve **all** of one's life and way of being, not just a single occupation. Vocation includes all the contexts of our whole lives—workplace, our roles and responsibilities, communal life, relationships, etc. We all have many roles we are called to and many relationships that matter to us through which we might be called. Therefore, everyone has multiple vocations.

At times, it can be hard to balance multiple vocations when we feel limited on time, energy, or resources.

### Venn Diagram Activity

Consider the many vocations within you. Listen to them. Then list them. These could include things like student, sibling, caretaker, community member, activist, artist, child, parent, etc. Make a circle (or any shape!) for each calling whose size corresponds to its current importance/place in your life, creating overlaps that make sense. What does each calling want of you? Which need your attention now? How do you know? In a Venn diagram of these callings, what names would you give the places where they overlap? Journal or discuss.

-L. Roger Owens, Alban Weekly newsletter, 8/8/25, adapted

## Listening Activity:

[Listen to You 2.0: Dream Jobs from 7:18-9:10](#)

This brief clip from Hidden Brain podcast illustrates vocation that is beyond a job description but more about a whole way of being.

The story includes a member of the hospital cleaning staff in an ICU who would rearrange pictures on the wall in patient rooms and pay particular attention to cleaning the ceiling for if/when they opened their eyes. This was not part of her work duties or job description but seems to be part of her vocation. Her vocation isn't the job of cleaning staff, but her vocation is to care for individuals, to promote their healing, and to treat them with dignity.

### Reflection Questions:

- How would you name or describe the vocation of the woman from the hospital cleaning staff?
- Have you ever had a job that did not feel like one of your vocations? Were you able to find a way to infuse vocational meaning into it?
- Is it important to you that your job is one of your primary vocations? Why or why not?

# Key Elements in Lutheran Vocation

## Element 3: (2 of 2)

How boring to spend the whole of my vocational energy trying to figure out if I am choosing the right work. It is of much greater interest to me to talk about how I'm going to do the work with integrity. How am I going to protect dignity as I work? And what truths are calling out to me as I work?

Cole Arthur Riley | This Here Flesh:  
Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us

It's beautiful to be part of a church that affirms that my calling as a boyfriend, as a brother, and as a neighbor are all just as holy as my calling as a seminarian and vicar. I often talk about vocation as an intersectional thing — my callings as a brother, a boyfriend, and a neighbor are all shaded by my intersectional identities as a white, cisgender, gay man in America. By thinking about vocation intersectionally, I'm able to see the unique ways that God has called me to different work.

Vicar Erik Nelson | Mount Olive Lutheran Church,  
Minneapolis; Student Luther Seminary

## NOTES

### Reflection Questions:

- Name the important roles you occupy. Which of these feel like callings?
- What's your experience of feeling called to multiple things? Is there a hierarchy of importance? A balance? How do they all intersect in you?



# Key Elements in Lutheran Vocation

## Element 4: Vocational Calling is Internal & External (1 of 2)

Discernment includes both internal reflection and awareness, and external support and accountability from the community. The Holy Spirit works through both. Callings that come from God may feel like inner nudges or stirrings, and they may also come from external sources, such as someone in your community who notices and names a gift or potential calling in you. In the Lutheran understanding of vocation, both are valuable and necessary.

For example, only internal reflection and discernment might lead you to think "I feel called to make a lot of money...even if I have to step on some people or exploit the earth to do it!" The wisdom of your external community can help ask questions like "Is that just? Does this support the neighbor? Is that calling from God?" Sometimes community can see, name, and celebrate something in us that we cannot quite see ourselves. When shared with us, then we can do some deeper inner reflection, too.

Young adults and students often feel a lot of external pressure around vocation, especially regarding their career. They may hear

"you should be a doctor/teacher/engineer, etc." This might be an honest and loving insight, but it also can be "success pressure." This is another reason there cannot only be external in discernment. We need to attend to what sparks our interest or curiosity, what God is saying to us in quiet moments (and sometimes our communities can help us hear God, too!), or what problems in the world we are most passionate about addressing.

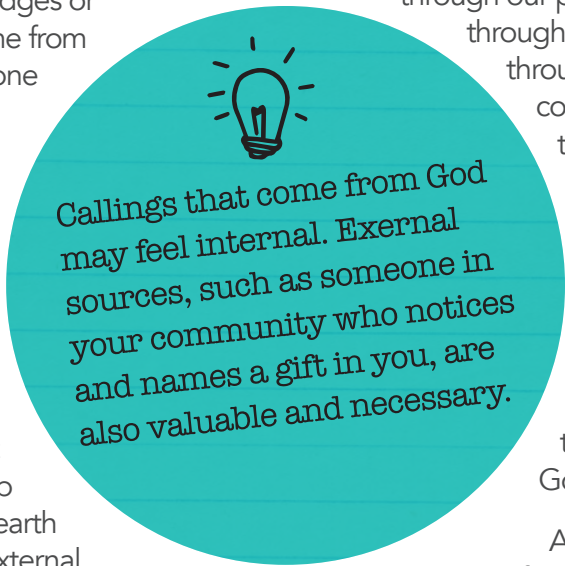
God can call us in multiple ways including through our passions and interests, through other people, through the needs of communities or creation, through hardship, etc. The greatest commandments (love God, neighbor, self) also clue us in to possible sources and supports for calling, places we might need to listen or attend to - to God, to neighbor, to self.

Another important reason for both internal and external reflection and discernment is that for many years, women, people of color, queer folks, disabled and neurodivergent individuals, and others have experienced oppression and discrimination in the church. This has been through official policies of discrimination or practices and cultures of discrimination. Sometimes the discrimination has been a combination of both. When the ELCA or church as a whole has seen your very being

as problematic or unworthy, this can make the external part of discernment challenging, making your internal discernment all the more important.

The experience of many marginalized communities is that although there may not be institutional external affirmation, there are communities providing advocacy, justice, and support. In fact, some minoritized individuals and marginalized communities have felt a deep sense of calling, a vocation, to advocate for justice and for change within our church. In some instances, the institutional church has repented and removed official policies of discrimination, often learning and being led by marginalized communities whose internal discernment led them to push against external discernment rooted in oppression. Cultures and practices of discrimination still exist within and beyond our church making both internal and external discernment important.

For further reading:  
[Finding a Way When Vocation is Denied](#)



# Key Elements in Lutheran Vocation

## Element 4: (2 of 2)

I never felt like my vocation was completely denied but certainly challenged. I have felt some push back and lack of respect for being young and a woman. I have encountered a few people along the way who weren't very supportive of my role as a leader in ministry because I was "inexperienced." It was at times quite discouraging but I had to remain strong and faithful to who I was and why God called me. I had to trust that God's purpose for me in this world was to make a difference and that just like Jesus encountered push back, I would too. We are all created in the image of God and no person is worth more than another. No person is more acceptable than the other in the eyes of God, to speak God's word and truth. We are all called to preach the Good News and that is the greatest gift I hold.

Vicar Erik Nelson | Mount Olive Lutheran Church, Minneapolis; Student, Luther Seminary

As a gay man, I can certainly say I've faced experiences where my call was questioned or challenged on the basis of my identity. One of the most effective ways I navigated that difficulty was through connection with other queer seminarians and mentorship from older gay and lesbian pastors. One important thing to remember when facing these roadblocks is that we never face them alone. There's an entire world of Holy Spirit-powered people who want to stand with us and support us. And as I'm thinking about how I live into my call in the future, I also hope that I will one day be the person that rising generations look to for support and mentorship. It feels very grounding and rewarding to know that I'm part of an unbroken chain of love and support.

Perla Flores | Recent PLTS Graduate

God's call on my life has emerged little-by-little, through doors that have opened and next steps that feel faithful. When I got back from my YAGM (Young Adults in Global Mission) year, I worked as a fundraiser for the ELCA. I visited congregations and individuals all over the southeast, and that experience taught me that I love being with God's people in church settings. I wanted to learn more about the Bible and my faith, but I still was not convinced that I wanted to be ordained. I thought I might still be a teacher, just as a professor of religion or something. So I applied and was admitted to seminary before I entered the candidacy process, and it was only through that communal process of discernment that I finally internalized the external call to ministry that I had been hearing for much of my adult life

Rev. Katie Elkin Ziehr | Campus Pastor; Holy Trinity Lutheran Church and Lutheran Campus Ministry in Chapel Hill, North Carolina

As a Hispanic woman, coming from an immigrant family, I have had to grow up knowing what it felt like to live behind closed doors. My parents faced oppression throughout their time living in the United States and I carried that suffering and fear with me. Since starting seminary at PLTS and becoming more involved at my home church, I felt like my call to ministry evolved. There were setbacks, insecurities and fear along the way that at times kept me from trusting what God was calling me to do. My story has shaped who I am as a person that stands up against oppression and has a strong sense of compassion for our world. I aspire to use the gifts that God has blessed me with to serve those around me. I aspire to use my story of growing up with a single mother and coming from an immigrant family to bring hope to those facing the same fears today. To bring the assurance of God's loving grace that will transform our battles as we surrender them to God

Perla Flores | Recent PLTS Graduate

## Reflection Questions:

- Where else do you think a calling from God might come from?
- What sources of calling have you experienced?
- Do you find it easier to listen internally or externally as you reflect and discern your vocations? Why do you think that is?
- In what ways do your identities shape your discernment?
- Have you experienced feeling oppressed or discriminated against in the church?
- What limitations have been placed on you? In what ways do limitations encourage your development, and when do they get in the way?
- Have you been able to find communities of support and accountability? Where?

# Key Elements in Lutheran Vocation

## Element 5: Vocations

### Evolve & Change

We are not “locked in” to a vocation. Vocational reflection and discernment is lifelong work and our vocations unfold over the course of our lives. It’s not about finding that perfect job or that one thing that will make this your best life, but it’s about the fullness of a called life.

Vocations may change or evolve based on internal or external factors. Your neighbors, circumstances, interests, desires, abilities, the state of the world, or ecological environments may change. You may also have new experiences. Therefore, what you are called to also may change.

**Stop moving. Stand in one place – this place.**  
**Breathe slowly; in, then out. Repeat.**  
**Repeat again. Let your shoulders sink and relax. Unclench your jaw; slowly close your eyes.**  
**Listen for your heartbeat; really listen. Feel it pulse in your fingertips.**  
**Lessen expectations. Under-do all your efforts. Requisition the time for your soul to catch up. Lean into the wind; feel it like a tree and test the ground.**  
**Learn to trust the resilience.**  
**It would be treason to move quickly – left or right – from this place. It is alright to be exactly what you are, who you are, where you are.**  
**Right here, right now.**

Right Here | Dane Anthony

## Reflection Questions

- Have you experienced or witnessed someone else experiencing a vocation evolving or changing?
- Does it feel stressful and/or freeing to think about vocations evolving over the course of your life? Why?

### Optional Reading Activity & Questions

Read this short opinion piece from the New York Times: [The Summoned Self](#)<sup>12</sup>  
-David Brooks | New York Times, 2010.08.03

- Describe “the well-planned life” and “the summoned life” in your own words. Reflect on how each of these might be showing up in your life.
- In what ways does “the summoned life” connect with the understanding that vocations evolve and change over the course of a lifetime?
- In your own discernment, is there anything you might shift to better align with the idea of a “summoned life”? How would this posture look in your current life?

# Key Elements in Lutheran Vocation

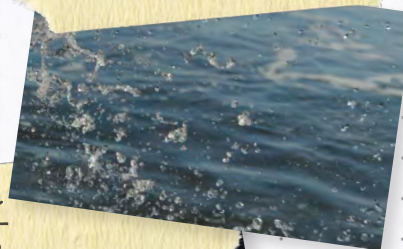
## Element 6: Vocation is Now

In everyday, ordinary life

Even if someone is working toward a future career, family, or other goals, we are called into relationship to serve others right now. Not just in the future. As a student or young adult, conversations about vocation can often feel very future oriented. But we have vocations now. For those in your group vocations may include being a student, family member, activist, caregiver, etc. Even if someone is working toward future career, family, or other goals, we are also right now called into relationships to serve others.

At the time of Martin Luther, religious vocations were in many ways escapes from the world. Luther shifted that idea, arguing that all of the world is God's and therefore holy, making callings part of everyday, ordinary life. Vocation is not about superhero moments or extraordinary feats but about regular, ordinary life now.

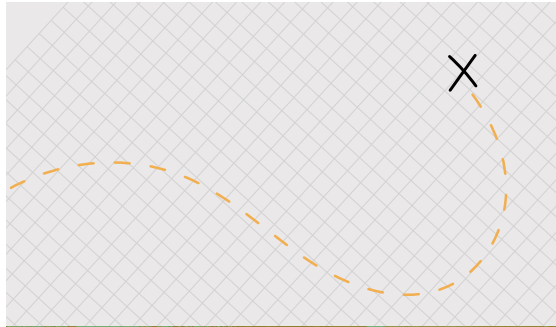
NOTES *lee*



## Reflection Questions

- Do you think of yourself as having a vocation now? What are those vocations?
- What vocations do you think you might have in the future?
- Facilitators: What would you add, remove, expand on, or emphasize from this list of 6 key elements?






# Closing Session

## Closing Practice: Examen

listening to your life for discernment

 See pg. 62 for a step by step guide to lead this practice or pg. 63 for an embodied version of this practice



The examen is a process of listening to your life, which is a key part of discernment. Engage the practice together and then try the practice on your own for 1 week (or until the next session). Journal your noticings each day.

### Facilitators:

Start the next session by inviting participants to share their learnings as they listened to their life.

## Optional Closing Activity

Set up a 1-on-1 conversation with someone in your congregation or community who is not someone you connect with on a regular basis (you may need someone to help you with suggestions).

Talk with this individual, ask them about their sense of call, particularly around the following elements of vocation:

- (1) vocations are plural, (2) calling is internal and external, and (3) vocations evolve/change.

Either as a group or as individuals, create questions in advance of the conversation (you might send the questions to your conversation partner in advance so they can think a bit ahead of time).

Try journaling about what you learn, or what resonates with your own experience.

### Facilitator Suggestion:

If it works with your structure, invite individuals to share key learnings in a follow up gathering. Do they have new insights or new questions as a result of their conversation?





**Pastor Jen Rude** currently serves as the University Pastor at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, WA, where she finds joy and meaningful challenge in accompanying students, faculty, and staff in learning and discovery, engaging big enough questions, and listening together for God's call to imagine and practice ways of living that are more rooted in compassion, justice, meaning and purpose. Her other calls have included serving as the program director for Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries and as an Outreach Minister with The Night Ministry in Chicago. In 2007, Jen was extraordinarily ordained at Resurrection Lutheran Church in Chicago and served there as Associate Pastor. After policy change at the national level removed barriers for partnered LGBTQ clergy, Jen was received onto the ELCA roster in 2011. Jen has a Masters of Divinity from Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA and a B.A. from Augustana University in Sioux Falls, SD. Outside of work, Jen enjoys walking and running in the neighborhood, podcasts and reading, decluttering, meals with friends, and living in beautiful Tacoma with her spouse Deb Derylak. | **author**



**Rev. Sam LaDue** serves in a call which combines campus ministry at Stanford University, where she pastors the only queer-affirming progressive Christian community on campus (affectionately known as the "Gay Jesus Group"), with year-round pastoral ministry at University Lutheran Church in Palo Alto, CA. She is a self-proclaimed "joy junkie," finding energy and beauty in creativity and communion. Prior to rostered ministry, Sam served as Director of Communications for San Francisco Night Ministry and as a communications and leadership development professional within a specialized sector of the hospitality industry. Her ministry background includes extensive work in liturgy and music direction in both Roman Catholic and Lutheran contexts. Sam received an MDiv from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and an MA in Practical Theology from the GTU, both in Berkeley, CA. She recently had the honor of serving as Artist-in-Residence and liturgist at Holden Village for Queer Renewal: Wilderness & Homecoming. When not pondering the universe and its complexities through mediums such as photography, glitter, and paint, Sam enjoys cycling, hiking, and life with her dog, Crispy. | **design** | [www.samrladue.com](http://www.samrladue.com)