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Guest Editorial

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Guest Editorial LYNN HUNNICUTT

If you look up the etymology of the word *vocation*, you see that it comes from Latin, via old French (*vocaciun*) and Middle English (*vocacioun*). The word stems from the root *vox* (voice), and is related to the Latin term *vocare* (to call).

One way to get at the definition of *vocation* is to consider cognates, or words that share the same root. These include: *evoke*, *provoke*, *revoke*, *invoke*, *advocate*, *convocation*, *vocal*, *equivocate*, and *vocabulary*. One might pause here and consider the relationship between one or two of these cognates and the sense of vocation as a call. Do they incorporate a notion of two parties—a sender and receiver? Do they include a sense of direction—of being for, to, or about something beyond both sender and receiver? Are they words that we might use in our work with students?

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Vocation’s cognates all presume a relationship of some sort. Convocation is a calling. Provocation is a work meant to incite action in another. To revoke signals the end of an agreement or understanding. Kathleen Cahalan defines vocation using prepositions, and notes that “prepositions express relationship. When we frame vocation through prepositions, callings become more relational, dynamic and multiple” (xi). Vocation also includes this notion. It presumes

relationship in which one party (the caller) invites a response from another (the called).

Martin Luther’s understanding of vocation implies that all Christians are called to love and serve God by serving the neighbor, and that this is accomplished through specific callings to a particular station in life. Thus, vocation presumes a relationship between God and God’s people. According to Luther, these general and particular callings or vocations are what we are created for, and they give direction to the lives we live here on earth. Similarly, Calvin differentiates between a general call available to all people and a special call generally made available only to believers.

This leaves one to wonder how those who do not claim the Christian tradition might understand vocation. Does God call a Muslim or a Jew in the same way God calls a Christian? What about a Buddhist who does not share the monotheistic tradition of Jews, Christians, and Muslims? Or what about an atheist who does not believe in a higher power? Can we say that these people also possess vocations? If so, what might those callings look like?

These are difficult questions. Here is one possible resolution. Vocation presumes a relationship between the caller and the one receiving the call. Yet the nature of both caller and receiver may (and perhaps should) be broadly interpreted. So, for example, my friend may believe that she is called by nature to work for the preservation of the earth. Another friend might believe that he is called by his



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community to strengthen the bonds between neighbors. I happen to believe that I am called by God to, among other things, raise my two children. Interestingly, Luther even seems to imply that we are called by our tools—the ordinary equipment with which we work every day:

If you are a craftsman you will find the Bible placed in your workshop, in your hands, in your heart...Only look at your tools, your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel, your articles of trade, your scales, your measures, and you will find...they say this to your face, 'My dear, use me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with that which is his. (as quoted in Wingren 72)

Returning to our list of cognates, we see that they are grounded in the everyday, ordinary things of life. Often, these cognates describe relationships mediated through words. It's no surprise that discerning vocation generally requires language, phrases, and sentences. How else would we be

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made aware of what we might be and do with our lives? And yet, we sometimes (perhaps unwittingly) conflate vocation with this grand and vague sense of ourselves and what we are meant to become. By its grounding in everyday words—the same grounding that these cognates possess—we see that vocation is most definitely not vague and need not be grand. Rather, vocations often consist of a specific summons to a possibly ordinary (dare I say humble) life. It is this sacredness in the ordinary that Luther emphasized when he wrote in "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation":

A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops. Further, everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community. (130)

One has to take care in claiming that vocation is grounded in words. I do not mean to claim that we lack a vocation until we hear specific words from an ultimate or supernatural source of our calling. Often the words through which we discover our vocations come to us in a distinctly ordinary way. Sometimes our calling comes in an invitation we receive over the phone. Or a friend points out something we are good at that we hadn't known about ourselves; a professor suggests to a student that she should consider a particular course, or major, or study away opportunity; an acquaintance invites us to join a group and we discover that this is exactly where we belong. Vocation is not merely a vague sense or a spiritual intuition. Our vocations sometimes come to us through simple words uttered in ordinary conversation. Indeed, the person who utters such a call sometimes has no idea that their words have such profound impact.

The careful reader will note that I have referred to both vocation and vocations. This is not an editorial error. We can think of vocation as permanent (singular) yet changing (plural)—a general thing we are called to throughout our lives, and the particular things we are called to for a time. From both Luther and Calvin, we have this bifurcation of vocation—a general calling to lifelong obedience to God combined with particular and possibly temporary callings to each individual. While aspects of our vocation do not change, the numerous ways we live out these facets of our calling may.

Regardless of how you define it, then, vocation changes over time. When we are young, we are called to study and learn. As we graduate from high school or college, we enter the world of paid employment, hopefully in a job that suits our skills and abilities and serves the community around us in some way. For some (many, we hope), this job reflects an aspect of one's vocation. As we approach retirement, we are called to refocus our energy away from paid employment and toward other forms of service to the community. Some will be called to care for parents or spouses through illness and death. When we recognize that discerning vocation does not depend on a once-for-all discovery, we are relieved of the pressure to help our students find their vocation (singular) while they are on campus and freed to equip them to discern for themselves their vocations (plural)—the ways in which they are being called to service in the world.

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The Lutheran heritage of our institutions, which makes our schools both rooted and inclusive, gives us the means by which we might foster the lifelong discernment of vocation. Our rootedness gives us a foundation from which students (and others) can learn about vocation and how it is discerned throughout life. Our inclusiveness

makes our campuses welcoming of all into this discernment—whether they are students just beginning to discern, or post-retirement alumni thinking about how to give back. This heritage can make our schools a place where we practice our own vocational discernment and move out into the world bringing the gift of calling to those we encounter—our colleagues, our alumni and our friends.

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