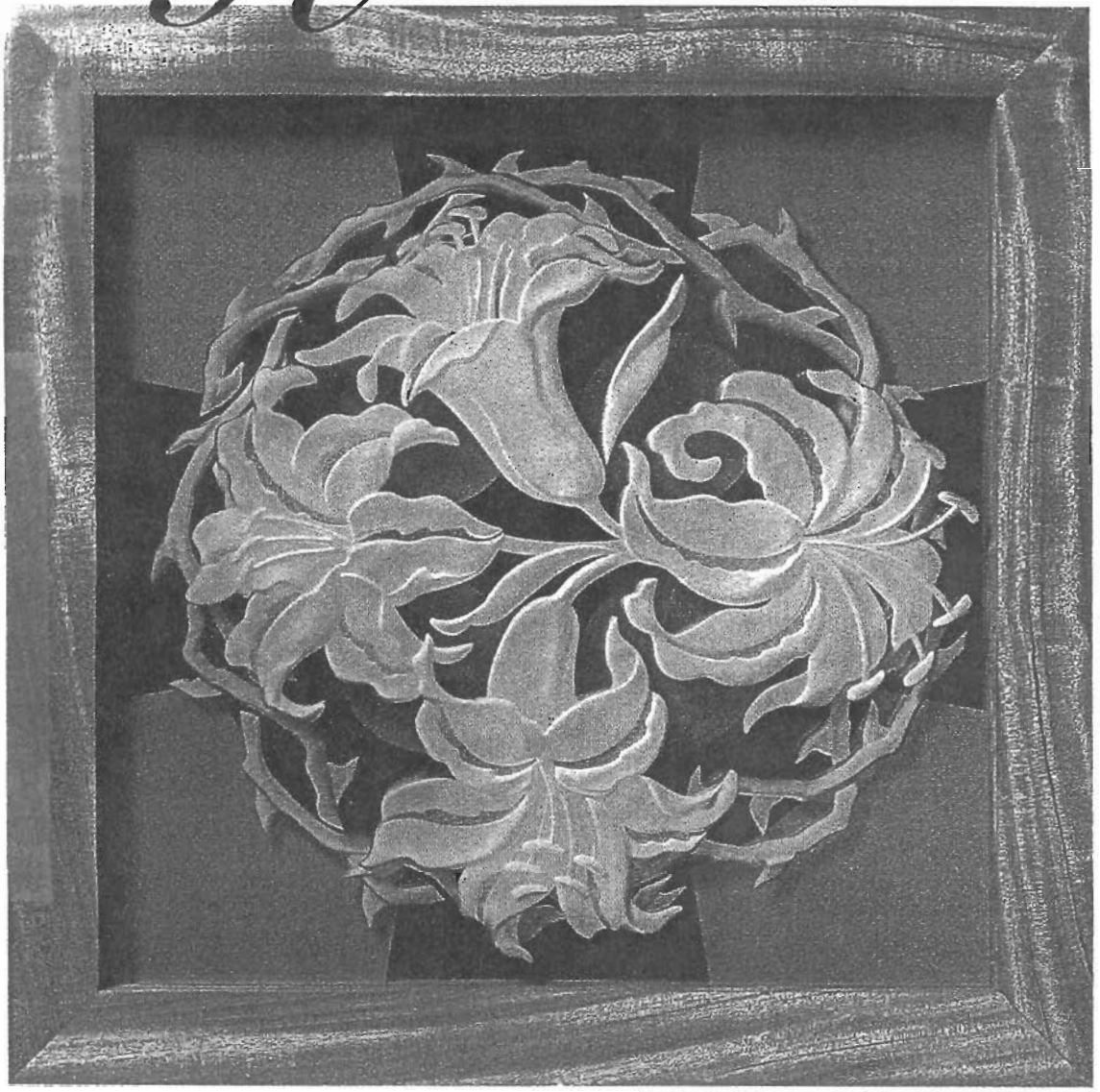


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PUBLISHED QUARTERLY IN DECEMBER (#1), MARCH (#2), JUNE (#3), AND SEPTEMBER (#4)
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG NUMBER SF 77-50 • ISSN 1059-9576

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“Annunciations in Most Lives”: Vocational Discernment and the Work of the Church

KATHLEEN HENDERSON STAUDT

Recently, a seminary where I teach requested letters of recommendation for two friends applying for admission. One was a postulant for holy orders who wished to enter the Master of Divinity program, and the other was a layperson committed to a ministry of teaching, who was seeking a Master of Theological Studies degree. I had walked through many phases of their vocational journeys, with the postulant working through the diocesan process, with the other doing discernment more or less ad hoc among friends, members of the congregation, and other spiritual support groups. Both were committed to radical changes in lifestyle, income, and family arrangements in response to what they were coming to understand as a call from God, and for both I was ready and able to say a strong “yes” to the admissions committee’s question, “Do you believe that this person is called to a vocation for which seminary education is appropriate?”

Yet, as I wrote my response, I discovered that, although my “yes” was equally strong for both applicants, it was far easier to write on behalf of my friend the postulant than for my friend who is, like me, a layperson deeply committed to our calling “to represent Christ and his Church, to bear witness to him wherever [we] may be” (BCP, 855). For the postulant friend, the diocesan process had provided some categories I could use to talk about the vocation to ordained ministry; for the friend in lay ministry, I had to invent categories. I wondered, moreover—and continue to wonder—whether this lack of common language for talking about ministry might follow my lay friend into seminary life, creating a sense of “second-class citizenship” around a theological education whose purpose was something other than preparation for ordained ministry.

In fact, it is almost impossible to think clearly about the discernment of a call to ministry for all the people of God in the church today. So much of our energy and reflection as an institution has gone into discernment of the vocation to ordained ministry (or occasionally, to professional employment as a lay leader in the church as institution). In many mainline denominations, the “discernment process” is an odd combination of institutional requirements and genuine, prayerful listening to

God, but it tends to proceed, especially in the later phases, as if the call to ordained ministry were chiefly a step—even a pinnacle—in one’s spiritual journey, and with less and less clarity about what it means to be called to ordained ministry or to any ministry as a member among members of the Body of Christ.

“Yes” and “No”: The Discernment Process

Here is how the vocational discernment process tends to work, logically, whatever its particular structures may be in various denominations and communities: a person active in the community—or, nearly as often, a relatively new, enthusiastic, and faithful convert—feels a call, a strong desire, a restlessness, a “push” to be more deeply involved in the life of the church. The call reflects a genuine response to the love and mercy of God, and it often expresses a deep and sincere desire to serve in a fuller and more focused way. As the sense of urgency about this initial push deepens, one of the *first* questions such a person is likely to ask is, “Am I being called to ordained ministry?” Frequently, it is the first question that will occur to a clergy member who encounters such a deeply committed person in his or her congregation. In most mainline denominations, such a person can enter a “discernment process” in which, through a combination of intentional conversations with members of the congregation, vocational testing, screening, psychiatric evaluation, and various other kinds of tests, the aspirant to ordained ministry spends a year or several years “discerning” a call to ordained ministry.

That is the ideal, anyway. In fact, many feeling the “push” of the Holy Spirit have gone to a pastor or bishop and been told, “No, I don’t think what you’re feeling is a call to ordained ministry,” and it stops there, usually with discouragement and hurt feelings on the layperson’s part. Thus a person called to new work, and ready to enter a process of genuine and intentional discernment, is effectively turned away because the *only* call that the church understands is a call to ordained ministry.

This lack of clarity leads to an unfortunate polarization in the church as institution. For those who do enter a formal discernment process, there is considerable pressure to defend their call to ordained ministry and to *prove* to the satisfaction of congregation and denominational leaders that this is really a call *not just* to lay ministry but to ordained ministry. For some, it may be too soon to answer that question on the church’s timetable—especially if the call to begin a process of discernment is very strong. At some point in the formal discernment process, often with enormous anxiety generated about being “turned down” after all this work, the person’s sense that the call is to ordained ministry is validated or rejected by the church. The denomination says “yes”—often, given changing deployment needs, to only a small percentage of those who enter the process. To the others, the church as institution says, in effect, “No, your call seems to be to lay ministry.”

Whatever *that* means. Besides “no.”

There are several disturbing implications in this structure. First, however we may pay lip service to the ministry of the laity, the discernment process we now have begins only after the question of ordination has been raised, and it offers only two answers: yes and no. “Yes” means, at least, join the leadership, and be set apart for full-time, paid, public pastoral ministry within the church (an institutional and functional, not particularly theological, definition). Although ordained ministers are supposed to be pastors to the people (BCP, 855), the process of getting to ordination, as it is currently constructed, tends to foster a leadership that has put enormous energy and anxiety into proving that their call to serve God is *radically distinct* from that of most of the people whom they will serve and with whom they will represent Christ and Christ’s Church in the world. After this effort to distinguish the call to ordained ministry, it is difficult to acknowledge that the call to serve in a particular way is something that comes at one time or another to everyone on a journey of faith. To those who have entered the formal “discernment process” and been told “no,” this reality about our common faith and life must seem for them for a long time to be a “second best” answer to the question of vocation. Yet the catechism in *The Book of Common Prayer* says that the primary ministry for all of us, lay and ordained, is “to represent Christ and his Church” (BCP, 855) in a world that is deeply in need of healing and reconciliation. Verna Dozier summarizes the vocational situation in urgently prophetic language.

Volumes have been written on ministry, but if any of them defined the clergy as a part of the people of God with a work to do for the whole people, which was no more or less important than any other kind of ministry, this fact never filtered down to the laity. Even the word “ministry” was taken over by one part of the people. Ministry was the calling of the clergy; lay people could only aspire to lay ministry, a second-class ministry of helping the clergy.

Ministry is serving the world God loves. The people of God are sent to love the world—the *people* of the world, not the kingdoms of the world, not the way of life that exalts one person over another, greed over giving, power over vulnerability, the kingdoms of this world over against the kingdom of God.¹

All of us are called to discipleship: to follow Christ in loving and serving the world. The laity are expected to live out this calling “wherever [we] may be” (BCP, 855), and the initial “push” and desire to serve that we learn to identify and respond to as a call from God is experienced in as many different ways as there are people, personalities, and jobs to be done in the world that God loves. Though it is surely

¹ Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1991), 149.

right for the church to select, ordain, and support its leaders, it may well be that the Holy Spirit is calling the church of our time to send out many more persons as missionaries, teachers, and healers, serving the world both visibly and invisibly in the name of Christ and his Church. We do not have a well-thought-out system for understanding or supporting these ministries. The call to ministry does not sort itself out neatly into the limited, dualistic categories that we have labeled “lay” and “ordained.” Indeed, those categories may prevent us from seeing new ways that people are being called to serve the world as the Church in our time.

Discerning the Work of the Church

It is time for lay and ordained leaders to step back, together, and ask ourselves, What is our understanding of the work of the church? Why are we a part of it? What is it for? Where does each of us fit into this great work? In the Anglican tradition we have used language at worship that calls for the sanctification of the whole people of God for our work in the world. We are sent out from the altar asking for grace “to love and serve [God] with gladness and singleness of heart.” The catechism’s understanding of our common ministry to “represent Christ and his Church” in the world is consistent with the thinking of Loren Mead and other specialists in congregational development who have noted that in the late twentieth century the “mission frontier” of the church is an increasingly secularized, consumerist, individualistic, and isolating culture with little familiarity with the traditions or teachings of Christianity.²

This state of affairs has existed for much of the twentieth century. Writing in 1921, during the spiritually turbulent period between the two world wars, the lay Anglican theologian and spiritual teacher Evelyn Underhill gave a description of social and spiritual malaise that could have been written today:

The civilised world at present seems to many of us to be living, as it were, under a cloud. Its dominant mood is that of unhappiness, depression, unrest. It is obsessed by anxieties and suspicions, uncertain in its hold on life. It has forgotten joy. Like a neurotic man, whose sickness has no name and few definite symptoms beyond general uneasiness and lack of hope, it is incapable of the existence which it feels to be wholesome and complete. Impotent and uncertain of aim, full of conflicts it cannot resolve, society is becoming more and more querulous, less and less reasonable. Sometimes it seeks violent and destructive changes as the only cure for its state. Sometimes it tries grotesque and superstitious remedies. Sometimes it relapses into apathy. But we cannot hope for any permanent improvement until it discovers the real nature of its disease.

²Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1991).

The source of the trouble must first be sought, not in a disorder of the social body as a whole, but in the state of the individual cells composing it.³

Underhill is an important though not widely recognized scholar, theologian, and spiritual teacher of our century, whose writings on spirituality remain among our richest resources for theological reflection on the work of the church. Born to a secularized upper middle-class barrister's family in 1875, she is perhaps best known as a scholar who has written extensively on Christian mysticism. Her most profound contribution to the life of the church, however, can be found in her lectures and retreat addresses from the 1920s and 1930s, in which she focuses on these "individual cells" of the Body of Christ, the separate souls both within and beyond the doors of the church who need feeding and nurture in order to fulfill the calling of the whole people of God. She draws from the mystical tradition her practical conception of Christian life as "cooperation with God," beginning in the individual's experience but dedicated to the life of the whole Body. This concept provides an important starting point for any thinking about discernment of our ministries.

Sounding remarkably like Verna Dozier in 1996, Underhill gives this account of the work of the church in a radio address delivered on the BBC in 1937:

The Church is in the world to save the world. It is a tool of God for that purpose; not a comfortable religious club established in fine historical premises. Every one of its members is required, in one way or another, to co-operate with the spirit in working for that great end, and much of this work will be done in secret and invisible ways.⁴

If we are to avoid slipping into Underhill's negative vision of the church as "a comfortable religious club," we need to take seriously her suggestion that each member of the church, each "cell" in the Body of Christ, must find a particular way to cooperate with God's purpose. Thus in Underhill's essentially Anglican vision, all of the work of the church happens in the response of individuals to God's call, and the life of faith is thus a continuing process of faithful service and openness to continuing discernment wherever we find ourselves in life.

"Annunciations in Most Lives": Fresh Language for the Experience of Call

Perhaps we will better understand the nature of call if we change some of the language that we have used about discernment. Much of this language has been associated with the experience of people in ordained ministry, but many people

³ Evelyn Underhill, "Sources of Power in Human Life" (1921), in *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, Dana Greene, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 69.

⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1937), 88.

in our churches may feel a sense of “call,” a desire for change and rededication of life for God’s purposes without necessarily expressing the experience in traditional theological language. Sometimes it is a perception that there is a job to be done that urgently needs doing, and a person is hearing some modern-day equivalent of “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us” (Isa. 6:8).⁵ Often people report a sense of restlessness, a sense that “God is trying to tell me something, and I don’t quite know what it is.” In order to imagine our way out of the limited categories we now have available for discerning call, it may be helpful to turn to a poet, remembering Walter Brueggemann’s repeated insistence that poets are the prophets of our time.⁶

The late Denise Levertov, one of our most important contemporary Christian poets, re-creates in vividly evocative language how the “push” of the Spirit feels to a seeker in our own time. In a poem titled “Intimations,” Levertov contemplates a familiar landscape where she has been at home in “other winters” and tries to discern what has changed:

I am impatient with these branches, this light.
 The sky, however blue, intrudes.
 Because I’ve begun to see
 there is something else I must do, . . .⁷

Without using any explicitly theological language, this poem renders acutely the vague and urgent sense that a change is coming, and indeed many people who are called to deeper, more intentional discernment say, “There is something else I must do; something isn’t right with what I’m doing now, even though it was okay before.” Such restlessness often marks the beginning of a process of exploration, prayer, and conversation that a person experiences when called to a more dedicated, God-centered understanding of ministry. And Levertov the poet knows that the right response to such restlessness is not to rush to answer the question—“What shall I *do*?”—but to *listen*. So her poem concludes:

Because
 I know a different need has begun
 to cast its lines out from me into
 a place unknown, I reach
 for a silence almost present,
 elusive among my heartbeats.

⁵ Compare Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 83-86.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 1-13.

⁷ Denise Levertov, *A Door in the Hive* (New York: New Directions, 1989), 5.

The image of fishing, of a yearning “to cast its lines out” into the unknown, evokes both the mystical tradition and the powerful associations between fishing and discipleship in the gospels. I have read this poem with groups of seminarians preparing for ordained ministry and with groups of committed lay people, and all alike have recognized in this image the early “pull” of vocation.

In another poem in the same volume, Levertov retells the story of the annunciation as a model for our own encounters with the unique ministries that God offers us and desires to work through us. Levertov’s words here establish the poem’s focus on the “courage unparalleled” of Mary, whose gift to all of us was that she freely consented to cooperate with God’s call. In the middle of this retelling, Levertov pauses to reflect on the universality of Mary’s experience:

Aren’t there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?
 Some unwillingly
undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.
 More often
those moments
 when roads of light and storm
 open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.
Ordinary lives continue.
 God does not smite them.
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.⁸

The moments of opportunity described here—tragically rejected, as “the gates close, the pathway vanishes”—describe with deep sensitivity the opportunities, so often missed in the church, for fresh and genuine discernment of ministry among the people of God.

Few persons, lay or ordained, hear a call from God that includes a detailed job description. A call is not an answer to “What do I want to be when I grow up?” Vocational discernment in our spiritual lives should not model itself after vocational counseling in the secular world. Rather, a call is, before all else, an invitation to listen and respond to God. To use the poet’s images, it is an opening out of darkness, a “road of light and storm” along which the eternal God wants

⁸“Annunciation,” in Levertov, *A Door in the Hive*, 86-87.

to walk with a particular person for the good of the world. If we take seriously Levertov’s musing that there must be “annunciations . . . in most lives,” then there is much work to be done in discerning the particular offerings of self and work that those annunciations ask of us, as we, following Mary, learn to cooperate in embodying God’s saving love in the world.

The Desire to Serve: Evelyn Underhill’s Experience

The record of Evelyn Underhill’s inner struggles as she was beginning to discern her unique and particular ministry reflects another important part of the discernment process for everyone: the discovery of a desire to offer oneself in some way for God’s work, an ownership, in the particular circumstances of one’s own life, of that awesome offering of “our selves, our souls and bodies,” which the Anglican liturgy of Underhill’s time—and of our own—declares in one way or another at every celebration of Eucharist. Emerging in the early 1920s from a period of spiritual crisis, Underhill writes to her spiritual director Friedrich von Hügel about an increasingly urgent sense of call:

In my lucid moments I see only too clearly that the only possible end of this road is complete unconditional self-consecration, and for this I have not the nerve, the character or the depth. There has been some sort of mistake. My soul is too small for it and yet it is the only thing at bottom that I really want. It feels sometimes as if, whilst still a jumble of conflicting impulses and violent faults, I were being pushed from behind towards an edge I *dare not* jump over.⁹

The gift that comes to us from the lives of the saints (and Underhill is now included in the calendar of saints in the Episcopal church¹⁰) is that we know something of how their stories ended, how their struggle was sanctified, and how that sanctification was used in the world around them. Underhill, responding to this sense of what she really wanted, found “at bottom” a remarkable ministry as a lay theologian, spiritual director, writer, and retreat leader—a ministry for which the church of her time had no categories.

We can learn much from some recently published, fragmentary notes that Underhill wrote to von Hügel as she struggled to discern a vocation for which there was no real name or category. What she writes here reflects strikingly on the struggle that many lay people face as they try to work out how to serve God faithfully among the many competing demands of a life lived out in the secular world. Underhill writes to her director in 1923:

⁹ Dana Greene, ed., *Fragments from an Inner Life: The Notebooks of Evelyn Underhill* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse, 1993), 109-110.

¹⁰ *The Proper for the Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 1997), 270-71.

I feel a great uncertainty as to what God chiefly wants of me as to vocation. Selection has become inevitable. I can't meet more than half the demands made. I asked for more opportunity of personal service and have been thoroughly taken at my word! But there is almost no time or strength now for study for its own sake—always giving or preparing addresses, advice, writing articles, trying to keep pace with work, going on committees and conferences—and with so little mental food—I risk turning into a sort of fluid clergyman! More serious, the conflict between family claims and perhaps duties and work is getting acute.¹¹

The search for balance and clarity in the pursuit of a ministry to which she knows she is called mirrors the experience of many of us—laypersons as well as clergy—as we struggle to claim and pursue the ministry to which we are best suited and most profoundly called by the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Underhill turned to her spiritual director for guidance in finding this balance and relied for ongoing discernment on her own deep life of prayer. Many people in our churches will turn for this kind of guidance to their pastors. This raw, unpublished account of Underhill's experience, together with the wise advice she offered to many directees over the years on seeking balance in life and ministry, points to discernment as a continuing process, requiring the ongoing support of community, pastors, and companions in ministry. This is the kind of support that we need to find ways to provide in what Loren Meade has called "the church of the future" if the ministry of the whole people of God, serving the world that God loves, is to be carried out faithfully.¹²

Discernment for Every Christian: Toward a New Model

Too often in our churches, people restless and eager to be involved take on tasks in or outside the church, not out of a well-understood and freely accepted sense of vocation, but because "someone needs to do it!" This tendency, common among clergy as well as laity, leads to resentment, burnout, the scramble for "warm bodies" to fill important positions, and the obsessive need to be thanked, affirmed, and appreciated by others for working so hard. If more of us were guided toward listening for the genuine call of the Spirit in their lives, perhaps we would have greater energy and spiritual support behind all aspects of the work of the Church, as the Body of Christ, and we would be closer to cooperating in spirit with the prayer we offer after each Eucharist for the power "to love and serve" God "with gladness and singleness of heart."

The focal biblical text for workshops and reflection on the ministry of the laity is often, appropriately, either Romans 12:1-8 or 1 Corinthians 12 on gifts of the

¹¹ Underhill, in *Fragments from an Inner Life*, Greene, ed., 126-27.

¹² See Mead, *The Once and Future Church*.

Spirit. Most work of discernment among laypersons focuses on the discernment of gifts. What are my unique gifts and talents? How can these be used in ministry? What are laypersons *doing* in the world and in the local church, and how can the church affirm and empower them for their ministry? These are important questions, but, to answer them effectively, those of us involved in the formation of others for ministry need to take a step back in the discernment process. We focus too much on what we *do* before we give attention to who we *are* with God, how we pray, and how we see God working in the world. To truly affirm and empower people for ministry in the world, where God’s saving action is being enacted, we must find ways to acknowledge that *all* of the work of the people of God is grounded in a clearer understanding of God’s call to us as particular “cells” in the Body of Christ and as members of the community that is our church. In the New English Version, the frequently studied passage about the gifts of the spirit in Romans 12 is introduced by the word “therefore,” and I would argue that, in the discernment of the call to ministry, all of us in the church need to start, and start again, and return constantly to the doxology that precedes “therefore”:

O depth of wealth, wisdom and knowledge in God! How unsearchable his judgements, how untraceable his ways! Who knows the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counsellor? Who has ever made a gift to him, to receive a gift in return? Source, Guide, and Goal of all that is—to him be glory for ever! Amen.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, I implore you by God’s mercy to offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart. Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 11:33–12:2, NEV)

“The pattern of this world” followed by formal discernment processes of ordained ministry can often seem like secular vocational counseling, matching talents with a job and then going after that job. It would be a mistake to model discernment for the whole people of God after “discernment processes” already developed for ordained leaders, many of whom risk losing track, in the pressures of pleasing evaluators and congregations, of the need to ground all discernment in the life of prayer, to truly listen to God. Christian discernment, although it leads us to find our work—the work through which we pray and become most useful to God—may not lead us to a fixed or easy-to-describe job description. The following are some exploratory thoughts on the possible shape of an intentional discernment program for all God’s people—well before anyone asks the question about ordained ministry with which so many of us now begin.

God's Work and Our Work: The Central Discernment Question

There is much work to do. Surely God is calling many people to ministry in this sense, and we have not equipped ourselves to respond to this call or sustained others in their efforts at faithful response. We need to begin by changing the question we ask about ministry from "Is this a call to ordained ministry" to the more faithful question: "*What seems to me to be the most important work that God is doing through the church in the world today, and what is my part in that work?*"

One: The Life of Prayer in Sustaining the Discernment Process

To learn to listen for an answer to this question, we should always begin in deepening our relationship with God—with the life of prayer, attentive meditation on scripture, and disciplines that make for openness to the leading of the Spirit. We need to understand as fully as possible the following:

- Who am I when I am most fully and honestly with God?
- How do I pray?
- How have I grown in relationship with God through worship in community?

Our own spiritual tradition contains rich resources for this kind of listening to God, and we need to reach into that tradition for guidance. The encounter and relationship with God is primary in the discernment process and fundamental to our growth as "tools" in the hands of a God who desires to reconcile and make whole. This principle, fundamental to our tradition, is the legacy of Evelyn Underhill the teacher, the insight of Denise Levertov the poet, and the insistence of Verna Dozier the prophet. Training for lay ministry must be built on a foundation of deepening personal and communal spirituality, an increasing faithfulness in prayer, and an openness to God's leading.

Two: Discerning and Owning Our Gifts and Our Desire to Serve

The first response to the mystery and majesty of God, as discovered in each of our lives, is the desire to be available, somehow, for God's purposes. Often people are deeply frustrated by a sense of not being as available as they would like to be. "How can this be?" was Mary's humble but genuine question in response to the angel's message (Luke 2:34). And she must have listened carefully to the answer!

We need to focus, and to help others focus, on where our hearts are drawn—what we desire to be doing for God's sake. The governing questions at this stage of the discernment process should be:

- First, and of central concern, what seems to me to be the most urgent work God is trying to do in the world, and what is my part in this work?

- What gifts have I been given that could be offered back to this work?
- What in my life prompts me to give thanks to God, and how can I live out that thankfulness?

Everyone in a discernment process needs to spend time with others in community, discerning and discovering gifts and learning to offer those gifts for God’s purposes. This is a time in the process when study and prayerful meditation on 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12:1-8, and other passages about spiritual gifts is appropriate.¹³

Three: Equipping Ourselves for Specific Ministries

After these foundations in prayer and discernment of gifts have been carefully laid, we may begin to ask more practical questions about education, leadership training, and equipping the faithful for ministry. Rather than construct broad-based programs of education for ministry or leadership training, the church needs to guide those who have been called toward the programs of education and equipment most appropriate for the gifts they have discerned and to the ministries to which they feel drawn. Good questions to pursue at this stage are:

- What more do I need to *know* in order to minister more effectively?
- Where can I find others who are engaged in the same or similar work?

Education and training should provide the specific skills needed to make a person more effective at the work to which he or she has been called. Training, then, should be developed and chosen carefully *after* persons have begun learning to listen to God’s continuing call. Not everyone needs the same kind of education for ministry. Some may find that they need the solid theological foundation provided by a seminary degree as a next step in their discernment process. For people called to lead small groups in the church or in its administration, leadership training may be needed. For those called to ministries of pastoral care, perhaps training in hospice work or Stephen Society skills should

¹³ Among resources for discernment in community, see Lloyd Edwards, *Discerning Your Spiritual Gifts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1988), and Suzanne G. Farnham et al., *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse, 1991, rev. ed., 1997), both of which include a useful bibliographies. The approach given in *Listening Hearts* draws selectively from the Quaker, Ignatian, and other spiritual traditions and provides a structure for groups. Jacqueline McMakin and Rhoda Nary also provide a good model for groups in *Discovering Your Gifts, Vision, and Call* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993). L. William Countryman’s *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse, 1999) provides a provocative and exciting theological grounding for an understanding of vocational discernment for all with some good practical suggestions included in his section on “Priestly Spirituality,” 175-95.

be made available. For those called to be artists, teachers, writers, healers, administrators, or political leaders, there may be a need for training in more “worldly” skills, but always with the support of a church community that can keep asking the important questions: where do we meet God in this work, and how do we cooperate with God’s purposes?

Ideally, I believe that the question of ordination would not even be raised until this stage of the process—and it ought to be raised as one of several viable possibilities for truly centered, grounded, and freely offered service to the church in the world. Leaving the question of ordination until this time might also help us to a clearer understanding of the role of the clergy in leading and sustaining the people of God as they seek to do the work of the church in the world. We still have far to go toward this ideal.

Four: Community Support

Each member’s work is part of the work of the whole church, and the prayers and support of the rest of the community have always been fundamental to our understanding of ministry. People who have found their work and are beginning to give themselves to it need to ask:

- Where is the community of prayer and worship that will support my ministry? Is it my congregation? A group within my congregation? Perhaps a group of friends and supporters throughout the church?
- What is the role of the larger institutional church in supporting me in my ministry?

Community ownership and support of the ministry of each member of the congregation is a desirable goal, but it must be real, not lip service. People must genuinely understand their role in the world and their place in the life, ministry, and governance of the church as *ministry*. This means that ordained leaders need truly to understand and recognize the validity of the call to serve experienced by the laypersons with whom they work, and to help them to discern and to claim that call, beginning with the life of prayer and the worship. Certainly, the education and training now offered primarily to those preparing for ordained ministry should be more available to lay people who have discerned a particular call to ministry. Churches should find ways to offer not only moral support but also financial and material support for such continuing education. There ought to be support and training for ministry at all levels in the church—from the local parish to seminary-based outreach programs.

There are exciting possibilities. A local church could facilitate gatherings of those involved in the same ministries during the workday (in the workplace) or at the church before work or over lunch (if that church is nearby). Pastors can learn more about the work their congregations’ vocations so that the division

between church and world might be diminished. Ministry-identified groups within the parish could gather periodically for prayer in support of the work they are doing—both in the world and in the outreach and inreach ministries of the local congregation. The key, as I see it, is to empower people to do what they are called to do, not just what someone else thinks needs doing. Where an organization needs someone to sustain a longstanding but perhaps unexamined function, ownership of ministry before God and the community, is critical. It must not mean “supporting” or “helping” with the work of the church (which many laypersons and clergy still consider the pastor’s work), but owning one’s particular work as ministry and claiming the prayerful support and companionship of fellow Christians, both lay and ordained, in the pursuit of our work in the world.¹⁴

The goal of discernment is always a continuing openness to the Holy Spirit in our common life of carrying out Christ’s ministry of healing and reconciliation, wherever we may be. Discernment is not about finding the right job or bringing people into the club. If we grow fearful about the fate of the institution were all of its members ministers, perhaps we will need to discern together the shape and purpose of the church in our time and how it needs to change under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Certainly, for the kind of process I envision, we need engaged, healthy, and spiritually grounded clergy who understand the importance of all ministries in the life of the church and who claim their role as pastors, nurturing, sustaining, empowering, and challenging the people of God (not doing the work of the church *for* the people). Leading people on the difficult journey of becoming and being the Church, and gathering together the “individual cells” that make up the Body of Christ—in a broken world profoundly in need of Christ’s healing and reconciling love—is the work of all. Bearing Christ’s love and its blessing has always been the work of the church in the world and the special ministry of the laity, called to “represent Christ and his Church, to bear witness to him wherever they may be” (BCP, 855).

¹⁴ Good resources on the ministry of the laity in the world include: William E. Diehl, *Thank God It’s Monday* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992); Verna J. Dozier, ed., *The Calling of the Laity* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1982, revised 1988); and the adult education curriculum materials in *Linking Faith and Daily Life: An Educational Program for Lay People* by Robert E. Reber (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1991).