

A Guide for Discussion

You may of course read the books in this series on your own, but because they focus on the transformation of the Episcopal Church in the twenty-first century the books are especially useful as a basis for discussion and reflection within a congregation or community. The questions below are intended to generate fruitful discussion about how members of the group have experienced vocational discernment, not only within the institutional church, but also more broadly in all aspects of their lives. The questions therefore focus both on what has been helpful and what has been lacking; on how the church has been supportive and where it has fallen short. They also seek to balance the personal with the corporate experience of vocational discernment.

Each group will identify its own needs and will be shaped by the interests of the participants and their comfort in sharing personal life stories. Discussion leaders will wish to focus on particular areas that address the concerns and goals of the group, using the questions and themes provided here simply as suggestions for a place to start the conversation.

chapter one

Why Am I Here?

Portaro notes that any process of vocational discernment must begin and end with the BIG question, “Why am I here?” How we answer this essential question involves our discernment of the commitments we make in our lives: the kind of work we undertake, the commitments we make to others, the “shape and meaning” of our lives (p. 4).

- ♦ Over the course of your life, how have you answered the question, “Why am I here?”
- ♦ What is your story of vocational discernment?
- ♦ When the “shape and meaning” of your life has not been clear to you, what or who has helped you clarify why you are here?



Reread the Prayer Book Catechism’s answer to the question, “What is the ministry of the laity?”

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?

A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church. *(BCP 855)*

- ♦ What are some of the ways you carry out these ministries in the world and the church?
- ♦ How would you answer this question, if you were writing a Catechism for the twenty-first century?

chapter two

How Did We Get Here?

In this chapter Portaro contrasts the common understanding of vocation as “call and response, or order and obedience” with vocation as a divine “letting be” (p. 25).

- ◆ Does this distinction make sense to you? In what ways have you understood God’s call as something to which you should respond or obey?
- ◆ In what ways have you experienced God’s call as sharing in God’s “creative impulse” within a relationship of love?
- ◆ How have you discerned ways in your life to be a co-creator with God?



Portaro states that “True discipleship not only dirties the hands, it breaks the heart, opens the mind, and stretches the nerves, as all good learning does.” He goes on to say that at the heart of such discipleship is a “very dangerous conversation” that takes place within our intimate relationship with God (p. 42).

- ◆ In what ways and in which places have you discovered “true discipleship” in your life, congregation, or community?
- ◆ How has this discipleship—this “good learning”—changed you?
- ◆ In what ways is discipleship part of a “dangerous conversation” for you?

chapter three

God's Gift to the World

“Appreciation of vocational discernment as a lifelong expression of baptism,” Portaro notes in this chapter, “acknowledges the various stages of human maturation as integral to personal vocation” (p. 54).

- ♦ What are some of the distinctive gifts of the stages of life—the unique gifts of children or teens, young families or people at midlife, the elderly?
- ♦ How are those gifts nurtured and discerned in the congregation? How are they silenced?
- ♦ How have you been able to live your vocation at various stages of personal development?



Portaro believes that a renewed theology of vocation that places our worth not in “utility” but in our origin in God offers us the opportunity to oppose those cultural biases and religious theologies that “equate spiritual and vocational fulfillment with financial success, social status, and political power” (p. 64).

- ♦ How does your congregation support the vocational discernment of people whose lives are marked by limitations of some kind?
- ♦ In what ways does your congregation affirm (or deny) the worthiness of every person in its worship, congregational life, and ministries?
- ♦ How is your vocation shaped by your own limitations? How might those limitations enhance your vocation?

chapter four

Why Are We Here?

In this chapter Portaro speaks of the experience of “flow,” which he describes as “the integration we experience when all aspects of life are functioning at maximum capacity and efficiency, when one is fully engaged, fully focused, and fully available to the moment” (p. 81).

- ♦ When have you experienced “flow” in your life?
When have you had a sense of “flow” in the life of your community or congregation?
- ♦ What contributed to these experiences and made them possible?
- ♦ What interrupted the “flow” or caused it to end?
Was the disruption perceived as obstruction or opportunity?



Portaro describes congregational discernment as a process that “comes slowly and incrementally” because it is based in relationship with God, self, and neighbor. He goes on to note that the vocation of a congregation, like the vocations of individuals, are “subject to progressive maturation” and development (p. 86).

- ♦ How would you describe your congregation’s current stage of vocational development?
- ♦ How does your congregation discern God’s call as a community?
- ♦ In that discernment process, what questions need to be asked, and by whom? Who needs to hear the answers?

chapter five

The *Whole Church*

In this chapter Portaro states: “We imagine ourselves into our vocational roles, both in work and love.” He goes on to say, “The ability to envision—to both imagine and inhabit the imagined—is an invaluable dimension of discernment” (p. 122–123).

- ♦ When have you imagined yourself into a new way of living, or a new vocational role?
- ♦ Who or what encouraged and sustained you as you turned your imaginings into reality?
- ♦ When have you or your congregation been unable or unwilling to envision a new future? Why?



Also in this chapter Portaro poses a fundamental question: “How do we nurture the kind of communal life upon which discernment depends, within which vocation is fulfilled?” He goes on to assert that “commitment to the hard work of discovering and excavating community from the cultural accretions beneath which it is disappearing is the difficult, countercultural labor demanded of us” (p. 127–128).

- ♦ What response might your congregation make to the question Portaro asks?
- ♦ How might your congregation undertake the “hard work” of discerning its unique vocation in this place, at this time? In what ways might that work be countercultural?
- ♦ What might encourage that work of discernment? What could hinder it?