The FTE Guide to VocationCARE
The Fund for Theological Education gratefully acknowledges the work of Kevin Spears and the Rev. Jeff Meyers for the concept and construction of this Guide.

Grateful acknowledgement is also made to those who created the VocationCARE curriculum and the initial guide for practitioners’ use: The Rev. Stephen Lewis, FTE President; Dr. Courtney Cowart, Director of Congregational Learning; the Rev. Dr. Dori Baker, FTE Scholar-in-Residence; and the Rev. Elizabeth Mitchell Clement.
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The FTE Guide to VocationCARE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

3  VocationCARE: A Social and Spiritual Process for Discerning Christian Vocation

8  The VocationCARE Practices

  9  Create a Space

  20  Ask Self-Awakening Questions

  27  Reflect Together Theologically

  30  Enact the Next Faithful Step

35  NOTES
VocationCARE:  
**A Social and Spiritual Process for Discerning Christian Vocation**

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

MARY OLIVER  
*THE SUMMER DAY*

What is VocationCARE?

VocationCARE is a set of practices designed to help congregations become places where everyone — particularly young people exploring Christian vocation and the call to pastoral ministry — hears and responds to God’s call in their lives.

VocationCARE offers a set of practices to guide the discernment process for interns — or anyone in discernment — those who accompany them as spiritual companions and for congregations committed to a vibrant culture of call and to the gifts and calling of everyone in them. VocationCARE grows out of research with diverse congregations, but each context is different. Rather than being adopted wholesale, we hope these practices will be adapted creatively. Diverse expressions of culture embodied in prayer, music, physical space, kinds of bodies, gestures, liturgies, poetry and ways of reading Scripture make VocationCARE richly different each time it is practiced.

All congregations and communities need gifted leaders. VocationCARE helps identify and support future leaders through practices that enable all Christians to grow together into a life “worthy of the calling we have received” (Ephesians 4:2, NAB).

VocationCARE taps into a deep collective “heart force” within us — one that we call leadership. When you practice VocationCARE, you provide a framework for taking deep dives into that inner source. It’s an opportunity for everyone engaged in discernment to participate in a clarifying and unifying experience.

Vocational discernment practices are unique in each church, tradition and context. Still, we have consistently observed four core congregational practices central to VocationCARE:

- **C** - Create space to explore Christian vocation together;
- **A** - Ask self-awakening questions together;
- **R** - Reflect theologically on self and community; and
- **E** - Enact the next faithful step.
Why do VocationCARE?

VocationCARE can help your congregation1 prepare for the future that is already at hand. Look around you. Church is changing. We need diverse, inspired leaders of all ages who greet this change with creativity and a sense of adventure. Many leaders will come from congregations like yours. Others may be attracted to your congregation as they search for a place to explore God’s call.

VocationCARE CAN HELP YOUR CONGREGATION1 PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE THAT IS ALREADY AT HAND.

Practicing VocationCARE will tap into the robust stories of vocation revealed in the everyday lives of the people around you. These stories — when shared over time — can transform individual lives and entire communities. They hold wonderful potential to renew the church, call young leaders and change the world.

The pages that follow will:

- Introduce each of the VocationCARE practices;
- Describe how to invite others into the practices;
- Provide insights on how to grow a community of practice and discernment in your congregation or ministry context;
- Offer exercises and resources for using VocationCARE within and beyond your work with interns and others in the discernment process.

VocationCARE: Its Adaptation

VocationCARE has a deep connection to Christian principles of discernment, cultivated in spiritual practices that have been adapted since their earliest beginnings. We urge participants to dream boldly as they adapt these practices today. Our partners have immediately structured VocationCARE for already-existing spheres such as: pastoral internships, board meetings, congregational annual meetings, Wesleyan-style weekly formation groups, confirmation classes, campus ministry retreats, inter-generational fellowships, grief support groups and mission trips. They have also used VocationCARE to launch new conversations and programs that stir vocational aspirations and raise leaders. At least one denominational body was led

1 We use the term congregation interchangeably with faith community. Your context might be better described as a campus ministry, spirit café or denominational body: all are welcome.
to re-imagine the ways in which they cultivate discernment and mentoring for young leaders. All of our adapters report a new depth of connection to one another and a new sense of God in their midst as these practices go to work in their communities.

The admonition to Christian communities throughout the New Testament is to be discerning of “the good, acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2). Paul prays that Christians’ “…inward eyes may be illumined, so that you may know what is the hope to which Christ calls you … and how vast the resources of his power are open to us who trust in him” (Ephesians 1: 18, 19, NEB).

Generations of Christians testify to the practice of discernment as key to the development of thriving communities — and to forming the leaders who emerge from them to do God’s work in the world. Discernment of God’s call remains vital to the church’s work right now.

VocationCARE engages stories, self-awakening questions and disciplined reflection to make visible the work of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives. These practices can awaken those who use them, and the entire church, to the purpose and future God calls them to manifest.

ONE OF THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT EXPERIENCED THROUGH DISCERNMENT IS INCREASED CAPACITY FOR VISION AND IMAGINATION.

Discernment encompasses all four of the VocationCARE practices (Create Space, Ask Self-Awakening Questions, Reflect Theologically, Enact the Next Faithful Step). The practice of discernment includes knowing God and God’s story. Seeking to enact that story involves the whole community.

There will be “E-moments,” large and small, throughout your practice together. These are calls to action. They occur for young people and those who accompany them on their journeys. In all they do, congregations can help members in small acts of discerning vocation; this can lead to other faithful steps of even greater scope and vision.

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit experienced through discernment is increased capacity for vision and imagination. Congregations see the life and passion that young people offer as a window that opens to the church’s future work, within the congregation and beyond. Youth and young adults, too, expand their own imaginations about their call as it is emerging.

The use of VocationCARE has an exciting double effect: as you pay specific attention to the call of one person, you awaken the call of those around them. Whole congregations awaken in compelling and life-changing ways.
A Framework for VocationCARE

Individual and group theological reflection and discernment over time leads to action in the world — action that is inspired by God’s call to us.

The spiritual practices recommended in this guide foster a continuous cycle of reflection and action. Only in God’s time will we know the implications of our practice in our communities and in the broader world.

This diagram shows the process that supports the VocationCARE approach:

The Process

Adapted from Otto Scharmer’s *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges.*
The “U” frame suggests that learning is not only linear and cognitive. The most transformative and profound learning is deeply emotional. It touches us at soul level.

The journey of discernment invites us to slow down — to approach our experiences with an open mind, heart and will, and to “love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength” (Luke 10:27). It opens us to an encounter with the Holy — an encounter that helps us envision and enact the future to which God calls us.

THE JOURNEY OF DISCERNMENT INVITES US TO SLOW DOWN.

What VocationCARE Reveals

Each of the VocationCARE practices offers a series of actions to take as a group. They lead to a type of spiritual meeting place — a place of divine mystery, with the primary mystery being our own lives.

Doing this work helps reveal how our individual and collective lives participate in the life and will of God. You’ll be introduced to new behaviors that allow everyone in your group, in small steps, to begin to see their lives through a vocational lens.

DOING THIS WORK HELPS REVEAL HOW OUR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE LIVES PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE AND WILL OF GOD.

Simply put, VocationCARE wakes us up to the creative action of God in our lives — and, together, guides us to discern how we are called to live in the world.

Other Times for VocationCARE

VocationCARE can enrich and enliven a variety of events and timeframes, including:

- **Weekend Retreats**: Retreats with adults and young adults may create a way to “pay VocationCARE forward” to the whole congregation or to other young people.
- **Weeklong Programs**: Use the VocationCARE practices with small groups as a curriculum or with other kinds of ministries, such as Vacation Bible School.
**Over Several Months:** Use VocationCARE to help older adults and young people discern and act on their sense of call and involvement in ministry, within the congregation or elsewhere.

**Seasonal Practice:** Use VocationCARE as a curriculum for Advent, Lent or Pentecost.

### The VocationCARE Practices

This section presents the four “CARE” practices to use with your pastoral interns and congregation:

- **C** - Create space to explore Christian vocation together;
- **A** - Ask self-awakening questions together;
- **R** - Reflect theologically on self and community; and
- **E** - Enact the next faithful step.

### Practices at a Glance:

1. **Create Space**
   - Set the stage: creating physical, inward and relational space
     - a. Covenants of Presence
     - b. Holy Listening
     - c. Testimony

2. **Ask Self-Awakening Questions**
   - a. Frame and practice self-awakening questions
   - b. Letting Go and Walking into the Future

3. **Reflect Theologically on Self and Community**
   - a. Awaken your purpose through theological reflection
   - b. L.I.V.E.

4. **Enact The Next Faithful Step**
   - a. Engage and design an action plan
   - b. The future of VocationCARE in your congregation or ministry
PRACTICE 1: Create a Space

Creating a space to explore Christian vocation requires attention to physical, inner and relational spaces. VocationCARE cultivates them all. The goal of this first practice is to foster harmony between the inward reflection you seek and the outward, physical arrangement of the space where you will gather.

Physical Space

Tend to physical space for VocationCARE by identifying a place that is “set apart,” away from distractions. Select a space conducive to quietly engaging the presence of God and the anticipated activity of the Holy Spirit among those gathered. Arrange chairs or furniture in a circle to recognize the equality in Christ of all participants. Offer a coffee/tea and snack service and other forms of hospitality to shape anticipation of the good that everyone will find in one another's company. If the room is typically used for other, dissimilar purposes, try to arrange it in a way that lets these other purposes recede for the time you are gathered.

Create a sacred focal point at the center of your circle. This centers attention and intention. The focal point may be a small table with a candle and flowers. It can also be a sacred image that represents the presence of God and highlights the communal nature of gathering together. Your aim is to create a safe and honest conversational space where everyone's dignity is honored — a space where the gifts of each participant, may come to the fore. Your denominational or spiritual tradition, or the will of the group, will help you determine how elaborate or simple you want the focal point to be.

YOUR AIM IS TO CREATE A SAFE AND HONEST CONVERSATIONAL SPACE WHERE EVERYONE’S DIGNITY IS HONORED.
Relational Space

You can help create a relational space in three ways:

- **Have the person convening the group remind everyone of the gathering’s purpose.**
  Give a brief overview of why they are there and what you aim to accomplish together.
  Summarize what led to this gathering, who in the congregation is responsible and why each person gathered has been chosen to participate in the discernment process.

  “UNTIL YOU SEE ME I DO NOT EXIST. WHEN YOU SEE ME, YOU BRING ME INTO EXISTENCE.”

- **Reflect a growing awareness of participants’ relationship to one another in Christ by using an exercise that helps them shift focus away from self and toward others.**
  Engage the exercise called, “I see you.” The point of this exercise is reflected in a Swahili proverb, Sawa bono Sikhona, which means “Until you see me I do not exist. When you see me, you bring me into existence.” In this exercise, stand up from your chair and walk toward another member of your group. Introduce yourself by name and by any other self-description you wish to use. Then say to that person, “… and I see you, [name].” Do this at the group’s first meeting, involving everyone. While it may feel awkward at first, this practice highlights the importance of relationship as primarily seeing someone in a way becomes an important spiritual practice (see Matthew 25: 31-46).

- **Use Covenants of Presence (see page 11), formulated by the Center for Courage and Renewal, to align the group in a shared intention of listening for the Holy Spirit in each other’s lives.**
  The covenants represent a way of showing up for one another in this space. They are intentional toward creating space for what Quaker activist Parker Palmer names as the “shy soul.” The shy soul cannot show up without the assurance of safe relational space. That soul is bound to retreat if it feels that others are being too intrusive or are “crashing” toward it to establish intimacy. The Covenants of Presence care for the shy soul within each of us. Read the covenants at every meeting to embody your intention to be present to one another in a transformative way. Avoid rushing through the covenants. Take a few moments for them to engage your thoughts. Repeated use of these covenants will have an effect on the way you and other participants relate to one another and move through the world.
THE SHY SOUL CANNOT SHOW UP WITHOUT
THE ASSURANCE OF SAFE RELATIONAL SPACE.

Covenants of Presence

1. Be fully present, extending and presuming welcome. Set aside the usual distractions of things undone from yesterday, things to do tomorrow. Welcome others into this story space and presume you are welcome as well.

2. Listen Generously. Listen intently to what is said; listen to the feelings beneath the words. As Quaker Douglas Steere writes, “To listen another’s soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest gift we can offer to another.”

3. Author Your Story. We all have a story. Some might say, “I don’t have a story” or “a story worth telling,” but you do and the world is in need of hearing it. You must claim authorship of your own story and learn to tell it to others so they might understand you, be inspired by you and discover what calls you to be who you are, to do what you do or to love what you love.

4. We come as equals. We don’t have the same gifts, limits or experiences, but no person’s gifts, limits or experiences are more or less important than another’s.

5. It is never “share or die.” You will be invited to share stories in pairs and in a large group. The invitation is exactly that. You will determine the extent to which you want to participate.

6. No fixing. We are not here to set someone else straight, right a wrong, or provide therapy. We are here to witness God’s presence and movement in the sacred stories we share.

7. Suspend judgment. Set aside your judgments. By creating a space between judgments and reactions, we can listen to another person, and to ourselves, more fully.

8. Turn to wonder. If you find yourself becoming judgmental or cynical, try turning to wonder: “I wonder why she shared that story or made those choices?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me?” “I wonder what he’s feeling right now?”

Adapted Touchstones used in The Center for Courage and Renewal’s Circles of Trust Retreats
9. **Hold these stories with care.** There are many people who will benefit from the stories they hear during our time together. Imagine hearing another as you would listen to Scripture — attentively, mindfully and open to the Holy.

10. **Be mindful and respectful of time.** We all have something important to share and the discipline of time invites us to focus and make particular choices about what to share and how much to share so that we might hear the deep longings of another’s soul.

11. **Practice confidentiality care.** We create a safe space by respecting the nature and content of the stories heard. If anyone asks that a story shared be kept in confidence, the group will honor that request.

12. **Welcome discomfort and dislocation.** In the midst of new and uncomfortable places and the company of strangers, move against an instinct to construct a mental space of safety or to check out. In what causes unease, see another world to be discovered. Perhaps it already lives secretly within you.

13. **Love the questions themselves.** Let your questions linger. Release the compulsion to answer them or to have them answered. Trust the questions to guide you toward loving first what you do not altogether understand. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke says, “Have patience with all that remains unsolved within your heart.”

14. **Believe that it is possible for us to emerge from our time together refreshed, surprised and less burdened than when we came.** Expect that our work together can provide renewal, refreshment and possibilities for what we can do together to create the future that is waiting to be born, and that seeds planted here will keep growing and flourish in the days ahead in service to God’s church and renewing work in the world.

**EXPECT THAT OUR WORK TOGETHER CAN PROVIDE RENEWAL, REFRESHMENT AND POSSIBILITIES FOR WHAT WE CAN DO TOGETHER.**

When all the covenants are read into your gathering space, ask if everyone will accept and abide by them. Ask, too, if there are any covenants that should be added — and if participants want to identify which covenants *attract* them and which *challenge* or give them trouble.

This exercise makes clear that getting used to the space is learned over time, not instantaneously. The covenants help to create a different kind of listening, engendered by habitual (not perfect!) engagement.
Evocative Readings

Read a Scripture passage or poetry as another element of creating space together. This practice further plugs us into a space of deep listening. Scripture and poetry both have the effect of breaking the ice within us — they overcome inner resistance and open our souls to be awakened to the voice of God. Select readings with the aim of awakening mind and heart. Scripture and poetry evoke testimony (or story-telling) and holy listening, helping us listen to one another as we would to Scripture.

Scripture and poetry both have the effect of breaking the ice within us.

Some Scripture passages for you to consider:

Luke 10:38-42 (Martha and Mary)
Luke 24: 13-32 (The Road to Emmaus)
Jeremiah 1: 4-5 (Jeremiah's call to prophecy)
John 1: 35-42 (Jesus calls the disciples)

The Scripture reading can stand by itself or be used as an antiphon before and after the reading of a poetic passage. For example, read Jeremiah 1: 4-5 before and after reading Dr. Howard Thurman's The Sound of the Genuine, or try reading Matthew 13: 31-32 before and after reading Trust in the Slow Work of God, a meditative poem by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. These and other passages (from authors like Frederick Buechner, Martin Luther King, Flannery O'Connor and other saints, poets and theologians) act as provocateurs, as necessary preludes to holy listening and testimony. They prepare us to tell stories that witness to the presence of God in our lives.
The Sound of the Genuine

by the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman

There is in every person something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself [or himself] ... There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. Nobody like you has ever been born and no one like you will ever be born again — you are the only one.

If you cannot hear the sound of the genuine within you, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching and if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born. You are the only you that has ever lived; your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all the existences, and if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.

So the burden of what I have to say to you is, “What is your name — who are you — and can you find a way to hear the sound of the genuine in yourself?” There are so many [voices and] noises going on inside of you, so many echoes of all sorts, so many internalizing of the rumble and the traffic going on in your minds, the confusions, the disorders by which your environment is peopled that I wonder if you can get still enough — not quiet enough — still enough to hear rumbling up from your unique and essential idiom the sound of the genuine in you. I don't know if you can. But this is your assignment.

The sound of the genuine is flowing through you. Don't be deceived and thrown off by all the noises that are a part even of your dreams [and] your ambitions that you don't hear the sound of the genuine in you. Because that is the only true guide you will ever have and if you don't have that you don't have a thing. Cultivate the discipline of listening to the sound of the genuine in yourself.

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3 This text is based on excerpts from Dr. Howard Thurman’s Baccalaureate Address at Spelman College, May 4, 1980, as edited by Jo Moore Stewart for The Spelman Messenger Vol. 96 No. 4 (Summer 1980), 14-15.
Above All, Trust in the Slow Work of God

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin


Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way
to something unknown,
something new.

Yet it is the law of all progress that it is made
by passing through some stage of instability
and that may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually. Let them grow.
Let them shape themselves without undue haste.
Do not try to force them on
as though you could be today what time
— that is to say, grace —
and circumstances
acting on your own good will
will make you tomorrow.
Only God could say what this new Spirit
gradually forming in you will be.
Holy Listening and Testimony: Gateways to Sharing Our Stories

Holy listening is a way to invite people to slow down and speak the truth of their lives out loud to one another. Testimony is the practice of sharing the stories that give meaning to our lives.

These two practices work together as we create our space for vocational discernment.

HOLY LISTENING
Holy listening is very different from the common, everyday listening we do most of the time. In many of our daily conversations, we listen to what's being said only long enough to inject an opinion at the earliest possible moment. We listen with our “outer ear” while, with the rest of our minds, we prepare our own response.

HOLY LISTENING IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE COMMON, EVERYDAY LISTENING WE DO.

In holy listening, the focus is on the speaker. The listener practices a disciplined posture of care, hospitality, relaxed awareness and attentiveness. This practice creates space for calm abiding with one another, and for the shy soul that longs to be admitted.

As Quaker scholar Douglas Steere says in the Covenants of Presence, “To listen another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service any human being performs for another.” Consider reading this quote aloud when your group gathers.

TESTIMONY
In some church settings, testimony means standing up to tell one’s conversion experience or personal salvation story. For our purposes, testimony is simply telling the truths of our lives to one another. As we share our stories, we testify to our life's truths. This is how we can look together for the ways God is at work in our lives. We testify so that “the work of God in us may be made manifest” (John 9: 3).

WHY STORY?
Stories are the best containers for our dreams and our truths. We use stories in VocationCARE as the primary lens for viewing vocation.
1. Stories communicate our passions, values and commitments through the language of our heart and emotions.

**STORIES COMMUNICATE OUR PASSIONS, VALUES AND COMMITMENTS.**

2. Stories foster relationship. They engage others and create empathy between the storyteller and the listener.

3. Telling our stories helps us elicit call narratives for ourselves and one another. Sometimes we discover a new truth about our lives only in the moment of telling it to another person.

4. Our feelings, our hopes, our cares and obligations — not simply what we know in our heads — ultimately inspire us to act with courage. Since our stories relate our values through our lived experience (rather than dogma, debate or argument) they help us create a more neutral territory where we find common purpose.

5. Stories lead to action. Through stories we become empowered to act on our own sense of vocation and enable others to do the same.

6. Storytelling opens our hearts, minds and wills, and fosters communion with God and neighbor. This is because storytelling is an act of exchange — of giving and receiving our deepest selves. It calls us to treat with care many things we may have previously ignored as insignificant.

**Story Prompts**

Story prompts help us get started in the space of holy listening and testimony. They turn attention to how our lives are instruments and vessels of grace, bearing their own divine
messages. When storytellers speak from their hearts, their stories call listeners to attention that is focused on how the Word of God is “living and active” in our lives. Here are a series of tips and directions to guide you through this process.

**FIRST HEARING**

**TIPS FOR FIRST HEARING OF ANOTHER’S STORY**

**Undivided Attention**
Make eye contact with the storyteller and give him or her your full attention as if there was nothing else more important than listening to his/her story.

**Holy Listening**
Listen reverently as if you were in the presence of the Holy and witness the truth of this sacred story with no expectation of responding. Hold the space with your presence and receive the precious gift in this story.

**Journaling**
Journal after listening and consider: What feelings emerged as you shared your stories? Where did you identify with one another’s stories? How did this experience feel? What, if anything, might this experience suggest for you?

**FIRST TELLING**

**TIPS FOR FIRST STORYTELLING**

Tell a story about a time when some insight into who you are came to you because you heard the sound of the genuine.

**Be Specific**
Talk about what actually happened. It helps to begin stories with “One time … ” or “I remember a time when … ”

**Be Descriptive**
Use images, feelings and places to provide texture, color and description to your story. Use the 5Ws: who, what, when, where and why.

**Be Self-Reflective**
Who noticed me or saw the genuine in me? How did I know? What did he or she say? Or what did I realize? What did I feel? How did it feel to reckon with my genuine self and have it named?
We include steps for two rounds of storytelling. This hones the practice and takes VocationCARE participants to a deeper place in their souls. It prepares them for the other practices that follow. The steps are similar in each round; only the prompts for stories change.

Notes: The concept of the genuine may be too abstract for the first time you try this practice. If so, here are other prompts to consider:

- Tell a story of a time when someone noticed you and your gifts and you knew it.
- Tell a story about why you do what you do, love what you love, care about what you care about.
Tell a story about a time when something you cherished was challenged and you had to make a choice.

Journaling between rounds of storytelling or when you have finished this practice may seem like an interruption of your process with one another — but it is a great way to capture aspects of the experience to guide you in reading your conversations with one another. It is also helpful to the next practice, Asking Self-Awakening Questions.

**Practice 2: Ask Self-Awakening Questions**

The experience of self-awakening questions begins with hearing the evocative reading and listening to the story prompts. Our stories naturally lead to additional wonder questions, such as, “I wonder why he did that?” “I wonder what else helped her make her choice?” “I wonder what her parents/friends/siblings might think or say if they could hear her story told as she told it today?”

Self-awakening questions wake us up to our lives. As we share our stories, we consider where and how they interact with God’s great story. When we ask the storyteller self-awakening questions, we help them explore new, perhaps unexplored, dimensions of their story.

In other words, self-awakening questions help the storyteller reflect on feelings, images, passions, concerns, hopes, values and purpose — as well as themes and patterns. Our questions are not designed to push solutions to perceived problems.

Here are some guidelines to asking questions that help open up the storyteller to discerning the work of the Holy Spirit:

**How to Frame Self-Awakening Questions**

1. The best questions are simple, brief and to the point.

2. Think of questions that you could not anticipate the answers to — questions that invite the storyteller into deeper self-reflection on his or her faith, gifts and sense of call.

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4 Adapted from Caryl Hurtig Casbon’s “Framing Open Questions” and the Center for Courage and Renewal’s “Guidelines to Asking Open and Honest Questions.”
3. Avoid asking questions with right or wrong answers. Instead, ask “how,” “what” or “why” questions. These questions focus inquiry, encourage reflection, touch a deeper meaning and generate curiosity.

4. Explore questions that invite images or metaphors because they can open things up in ways that more direct questions don’t.

5. Ask questions that help the storyteller to reflect on clarifying feelings, vivid images, passions, concerns, hopes and values as well as patterns and themes in his or her story.

6. Ask questions that help the storyteller explore his or her inner realities as well as the outward facts — what he or she loves, cares about or values.

7. Ask questions aimed at helping the storyteller remember the risks or challenges, choices and outcomes in their story.

8. Pace questions to allow some silence between the last answer and the next question. Questions that emerge too quickly often feel a little intrusive, cutting off the deep reflection that can help the storyteller.

9. Trust your intuition in asking questions. If you are not sure about a particular question, sit with it for a while and wait for clarity.

10. As you listen deeply to the storyteller, allow your questions to emerge from a place where your head and heart are open to the presence of the Holy.

A Simple Exercise for Asking Self-Awakening Questions

Discuss the story told by the person on your left (if you are arranged in groups). First, sit with the story. See what question emerges for you to ask for the storyteller’s benefit. After a few minutes of pondering, pose your question. The storyteller is not obligated to answer but is invited to sit with the question. He or she may respond by saying how or where the question takes them in deeper relationship to the story and its meaning. The storyteller may also choose to simply hear and hold the question without comment.

As with holy listening and testimony, the process of asking self-awakening questions is well-served by journaling. This allows each person to capture the questions and impressions that the process has stirred.
“Creating conditions under which students can conduct an inner search does not mean dictating answers to inner life questions which, by definition, do not have answers in any conventional sense. It means helping students learn how to ask questions that are worth asking because they are worth living, questions one can fruitfully hold at the center of one’s life.”

PARKER PALMER
HEALING THE HEART OF DEMOCRACY

Additional Exercise:

Close your session by using everyone’s journal notes on the stories and self-awakening questions. Construct a wall of post-its (of one color) of words or phrases that name the discoveries and truths your time together has revealed. Make a commitment to them as truths to be upheld and protected by your lives and actions.

Exercises for Letting Go and Walking into the Future

Two helpful exercises — Letting Go and Walking into the Future — can be used as you bridge to the next practice, which is Reflect Together Theologically.

These exercises foster a deep place of vision and imagination for our lives together. They support us in “calling in” God’s New Creation. They help integrate the work you have done in the practices thus far.

We use Letting Go and Walking into the Future to encourage us to see our lives in God as deeply connected — even more than our stories and questions would suggest. Both exercises have a sacramental quality. They support our response to God’s calling of us to awakening and deep renewal. They open us to a future that is distinct from the past. This is a core intent of VocationCARE — to take our first steps into that future.
Letting Go and Walking into the Future work best in large groups, but you can also use them in smaller gatherings. Since these are visionary exercises, you will use them more infrequently than the L.I.V.E. model presented within this section. But they are instrumental in creating a space for theological reflection. We find them especially valuable for a congregation-wide practice of visioning how God is interacting with your church and discovering where God is calling you to be in God’s greater story.

We suggest you use these practices in one of your initial meetings at the end of story telling or after asking self-awakening questions. You can also do these exercises at regular intervals with the L.I.V.E. model.

The Letting Go Exercise

Holy listening and testimony put us back in touch with our deep values, realigning or “tuning” our minds, hearts and wills to what really matters most.

Self-awakening questions help sharpen our attentiveness to where and how the Holy Spirit is moving in our individual and collective lives.

But with a human nature that is often resistant to change, there is yet another discipline we need to practice — Letting Go. Letting go of old habits of the heart, mind and will is necessary before we are really ready to let new ideas and inspirations fill us and move us into the future. This practice helps us empty our “old wine skins” and make room for the “new wine,” or the creativity and joy of Pentecost (Luke 5:33-39, Matthew 9:14-17 and Mark 2:18-22).

Letting Go is an opportunity to suspend patterned ways of knowing that may be “stuck,” or that serve as a crutch that we no longer need. Letting Go is aimed at our tendency to exercise sole control over our lives. It is an invitation to the renewing work of the Holy Spirit — which holds our lives, both the good and the bad, and offers transformation.

- Seated in a chair, take a moment to center yourself. Take a few deep breaths, in and out. Get yourself ready to be present to this moment.
- Find a place on your seat that you can grip with your hands. Imagine that there is zero gravity in this room and the only way you can stay in your chair is to hold onto it for dear life. Imagine that if you let go you would float away.
- Don’t stop holding the chair. Close your eyes and begin to imagine a negative belief you have about yourself or something you are ashamed of. Now, holding your chair even more tightly, imagining that you are holding on to this negative belief. Hold it tightly for eight seconds — as if your very life depended on it.
Now, as you release your grip on the chair, also release this negative belief. Experience the belief floating away, up away from your body, over your head, through the ceiling and into the sky. Let it go. Un-tether it. Feel yourself being untied from it.

Now imagine a positive belief about yourself or something you are really proud of. Grip it tightly as if your identity depended on it. Hold onto it tightly for eight seconds. Now release it. Unhand it. Just let it go.

Next, focus on a negative opinion or judgment you have about someone in the room. Grip it. Really hold onto it tightly. Tense your muscles as you concentrate on this negative opinion. Now, release it. Open your hands and let it go.

Focus on a positive opinion, something you like or admire about someone in the room — maybe a quality that you are envious of or wish you had. Grip it. Release it. Let it go.

Now focus on a negative belief you have about the church. Something you think is perhaps a major, unsolvable problem. Pour your energy into gripping this negative belief, this problem. Really feel yourself focused on its power. Let it go. Feel it release.

Now focus on a positive belief you have about the church. Something you think is wonderful and gives you hope about the future. Allow yourself to feel the energy of your hope, your desire, in the way you hold it tightly. Grip it. Hold it for eight seconds. Now, release it. Let it go.

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A Walk into the Future Exercise

A Walk into the Future is a guided, embodied meditation. The exercise is intended to slow us down long enough for an encounter with God. It supports envisioning a glimpse of the future within us that is waiting to emerge, an echo from Luke's Gospel that the “Kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21).

Throughout the Christian story, we find ordinary people who have done extraordinary things because of their encounter with the Holy. We cannot enact what we have not first seen within us and among us. When we engage this meditation, we become more aware of the presence of God and more conscious of the deeper longings within us.
THROUGHOUT THE CHRISTIAN STORY, WE FIND ORDINARY PEOPLE WHO HAVE DONE EXTRAORDINARY THINGS.

This process suggests that the seeds of the future represent a deeper longing that is grounded in our sense of vocation and call, and formed in community. We have a responsibility to pay attention to what God seeks to do through us to bring about this future — and the role we can play in it. This future is planted in the stories we have heard and shared. It represents opportunities for ministry — invitations to do God's healing work in the world. The first step to enacting the future requires that we practice cultivating a capacity to see a compelling future worth enacting.

The visionary space this exercise invites us to has been described by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* as “an inner gate,” one that “requires us to drop the baggage we've acquired on our journey … When this ‘threshold’ is crossed collectively people offer many different accounts of the experience. Some talk about extraordinary creativity, some about almost boundless energy, yet others about a dialogue where people forget who is saying what … Getting to that ‘different place,’ which allows presencing to occur, begins as we develop a capacity to let go and surrender our perceived need for control.”

- **Find a comfortable place and position.** Close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths. Release. Free your mind of your worry, concern, questions, excitement or enthusiasm. Open your mind, heart and will. Now journey down from your head into your heart. Try to become in tune with your feelings and surroundings.

- **Imagine standing at a doorway of a possible future where your church is caring for vocation and enacting opportunities for people to explore their sense of purpose. Is it a future where young people are responding to a call to ministry and leading the church in your context?**
First 10 minutes:

- Take one step forward. What do you see past that doorway into the future?
- Step through the threshold of the doorway into the future.
- Turn around 360 degrees. What do you see? What’s different? Who is there? What are people doing? How are people relating to each other between generations? What is the mood of the community? How are you feeling? What are the sounds? How are you and others caring for vocation in young people and adults who work with them?

Next 10 minutes:

- From that future place, look back through the doorway to the past and find yourself. What advice do you give to your past self to move toward the future you see?
- Walk back through the doorway and return again to the present. Write what you saw, felt and heard. Be as specific as you can about the images, feelings and activities that took place in your vision.

Activity after the Letting Go and A Walk into the Future Exercises

Using your journal notes, construct a set of post-it notes (green) that reflect, in a single word or phrase, what you saw when you walked into the future and another set of post-its (orange) acknowledging by word or phrase the things you let go of as you moved across the threshold (the doorway) into the future.

When everyone posts their notes on the wall of your practice space — together with the first set of post-it notes from your storytelling/self-awakening questions exercise — you construct an emerging portrait of yourselves as a church together, a Fifth Gospel, so to speak, one that may indicate the future that wants to be born. Take a walk through this gallery of post-it notes and see what themes emerge. In this constellation of expression, themes are apt to repeat themselves and connect with others. Take some time to discuss together what you saw, felt and connected to in the wider context of Christian discipleship. Also discuss whether you were provoked to do something new or embrace a new
habit of being because of what you saw, felt and
discovered. One way to illuminate what is emerging
from this gallery wall is to follow the L.I.V.E. model in
practice three, **Reflect Together Theologically on Self
and Community**.

Another way is to engage a kind of *lectio divina* or
“holy reading” of the wall, especially of common
themes, to hear more deliberately what God is saying
to your gathered community. What words or phrases
stand out or which ones hold invitations, not just for
individuals but for everyone to consider?

**PRACTICE 3: Reflect Together
Theologically on Self and Community**

Our third practice is a disciplined way to put our lives and experiences in conversation
with our religious heritage. We look for the places where our stories intersect with God’s
story. We let our questions act as a *bridge to wonder* about how God might be present to
our deep ponderings and longings about our life and its purpose.

**WE LOOK FOR THE PLACES WHERE
OUR STORIES INTERSECT WITH GOD’S STORY.**

The Scriptures present stories that serve this reflecting together. From the New Testament,
we look again at the story of the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35) to
ask ourselves how *Jesus is present and walking among us* in our practice together. We may
also turn to the story of the Woman at the Well (John 4: 5-30) as an example of how God’s
story intersects with a very human story about the longing to be known as we
really are.5

You can also use stories from the Hebrew Bible to help your reflection, such as the story
of Jacob’s dream-vision at Bethel (Genesis 28: 10-17), where he recognized that “surely
the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.” Or, you might use the story of Jacob’s
wrestling with the divine being at Peniel (Genesis 32: 22-32) and Jacob’s discovery that
he has looked into the face of God “and lived.” The call stories of Moses, Samuel, Isaiah
and Mary are other possibilities.

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5 Thanks to the Rev. Cynthia Hizer, Church of the Epiphany, Atlanta, for this description of John 4.
However, the best references, biblical or otherwise, occur spontaneously in your reflection together. Our stories have almost automatic associations, not only with Scripture but also with hymns, spiritual practices, poetry and other memories that we associate with the Holy. These help us view our stories and questions with an even greater appreciation of God’s work and presence.

Reflecting together theologically is intended to be habit-forming for your work with pastoral interns. It can also be incredibly fruitful in your life as a congregation.

Taken together, the four VocationCARE practices create a structure for practicing discernment that places the exploration of vocation in a conversation of learning and listening to the Holy Spirit speaking through one another, indicating through that conversation where or to what an individual or community is called or what action to take.

The L.I.V.E. Model for Reflection

L.I.V.E. is an acronym for the steps you move through in the VocationCARE practice of Reflecting Together. Briefly described, these are:

1. **Listen** carefully to the story from Scripture. Breathe deeply and allow yourself to be fully present to the story. Allow it to wash over you with the expectation that God is somewhere present to your own life. Listen to the nuances, images, colors, smells and sights in the story.

2. **Immerse** yourself in the feelings and associations of the story, as well as the feelings that the story evokes. A good way to uncover feelings is to pay attention to your body. Did you identify with anyone (or more than a single person) in the story? What stories from your life does it recall?

3. **View the Story In Wider Perspective**. Open your vision to see where this story connects with larger stories. How does this story remind you of what you know about God? How does it challenge what you know? Is there any association from the Bible, a snippet of a sermon, or a line from a hymn, song or poetry that you have absorbed? Does it connect with a holy memory from childhood or another time from your life when you felt at home in God’s universe? What does God look like as you ponder this story through a wider lens?

4. **Explore** “aha moments” and actions or attitudes to which the story and your reflection call you. Is there something from reflecting on this moment that you want to take with forward with you into the day, and into your life? Is there some action, large or small, that you would like to take today in response to this story or to God’s call in your life?

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Ways to use L.I.V.E.

1. In circles of people called together to help pastoral interns process their experiences, invite interns and church members to write a story, using this prompt: Tell a story about a time when your gifts were used in God’s work. Use the steps of L.I.V.E. to awaken the connections between your callings and biblical calling.

2. At the end of the day on a mission/service trip, ask someone to tell a story about “a place where you experienced God today.” Practice the steps of L.I.V.E. when the story has been told.

3. In a youth group, Sunday School class, or intergenerational gathering, invite and collect stories from everyone at the beginning of a season. Set aside 30 minutes at the beginning or end of the session to practice the steps of L.I.V.E. with a different story from week to week.

4. Watch a film or a clip from a film or view a play to name the connections between the plot and characters and the stories of our lives, and the threads of God’s story as revealed through Scripture, tradition and our everyday experience.

You may find, with repeated practice, a built-in capacity and inclination to this kind of reflection. It will strengthen awareness of the movements of God in your life and your movement in the life of God, individually, and as a community.

Through repeated practice, you will develop antennae for the presence and movement of the Holy Spirit.

**THROUGH REPEATED PRACTICE, YOU WILL DEVELOP ANTENNAE FOR THE PRESENCE AND MOVEMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.**

The VocationCARE practices will have a number of possible applications in your congregation or ministry context. Your use of them with pastoral interns may be only a beginning. You can practice VocationCARE in other settings and connections with young people, especially those that foster intergenerational conversation.

VocationCARE has a cumulative capacity to provoke discoveries that demand action. These discoveries identify a future to be explored and lived, IF we allow ourselves to be led toward seeing and planning the future that God creates through us.
VOCA TIONCARE HAS A CUMULATIVE CAPACITY TO PROVOKE DISCOVERIES THAT DEMAND ACTION.

This is what organizational expert C. Otto Scharmer calls “presence-ing.” It is being present to the reality of our lives together, in all its potential and limitations. It is a way to access the future that the Holy Spirit longs to see enacted. The exercises we have done to this point are experiential introductions to this kind of presence-ing. They create in us an ability to envision “a compelling future worth enacting.” They are spiritual exercises that prepare us to “think like designers” in God’s company.

PRACTICE 4: Enact the Next Faithful Step

Now we will introduce a design process that will help you Enact the Next Faithful Step. These faithful steps are applications of VocationCARE in contexts of your congregation or ministry, beyond internships. It is a process for developing and putting flesh on that thing you are given to do by God — what you discern your next step to be.

In VocationCARE, our stories are the key to discerning what “that thing” is, for us as individuals and for all of us as a community. So far you have discovered, re-experienced and mined those stories by creating space, asking self-awakening questions and reflecting together. These are ways of tracing the threads of Divine activity in our individual and collective lives.

Now, you can use the Design Studio process to take what you have discovered and begin to shape (with God) that “new thing” God is creating in the world (see Isaiah 43:18 ff.), in this case, in your life as a congregation.

Why Do Design Studio

It may be that use of the VocationCARE practices for one reason or convening cause may spark imagination for other adaptations. You will want to think and plan systematically for these alternate uses (examples of adaptations of the CARE practice in funded projects may be found at: www.fteleaders.org/VocationCAREadaptations).

Critical to the success of enacting the next faithful step is a core question that begins to move you toward a plan: How might the practice of VocationCARE serve us in that thing we are given to do by God? This is one example of a design question. Your design question
becomes the anchor for brainstorming and solidifying ideas that give life and substance to your localized version of God’s dream for the world.

**HOW MIGHT THE PRACTICE OF VocationCARE SERVE US IN THAT THING WE ARE GIVEN TO DO BY GOD?**

The Design Studio exercise builds on the **visionary** focus you have developed. It also shows how to create a blueprint for further action using VocationCARE. The blueprint will address the practical aspects of roles, organization and necessary gifts, individual and collective, to achieve your outcomes.

Like the other three VocationCARE practices, the way we Enact the Next Faithful Step is disciplined. It requires focus and careful listening to one another, which demonstrates that it is possible for communities to flourish and be spaces where everyone has a voice. The question of vocation applies to **everyone** who engages in your practice — whosoever commits to take this journey together. As you move through the steps of the design process, consider referencing the Covenants of Presence as a guide to fruitful conversation and work together on brainstorming possibilities, identifying actionable ideas and choosing your goal.

**Thinking Like Designers**

IDEO, an award-winning global design firm in California, has a video on their version of the design workshop which can be viewed on YouTube at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=M66ZU2PC1cM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M66ZU2PC1cM).

More information on IDEO and its projects is available at: [www.ideo.com](http://www.ideo.com).

It is suggested that you work over the course of a day, or no more than two days in the Design Studio process. Day two enables you to sleep on and re-visit prototypes developed in day one. You may choose to work with a single design team or if your imagination as a parish or ministry context gives birth to more than one executable “big idea,” you can work with several teams.
The steps you will follow for this process include:

1. **Brainstorming** or hearing all ideas into your design space. Entertaining multiple ideas, however wild, without censoring them is an important initial step. Depending on the time you dedicate to the entire process, you should allow at least 50-60 minutes for brainstorming. This could be your *Pentecost* moment, a time for an outflow of Divine energy before the deeper work of discerning and choosing ideas. (See *Tips for Brainstorming* on the following page.)

2. **Choosing 3-4 Compelling Ideas.** These are ideas that contain the most attractive options for a design group. They highlight your program goal and reflect action steps. Choosing compelling ideas is difficult because you will need to let go of the multitude of possibilities brainstorming generates and select ideas that more actionable. These selected ideas also reflect what the Holy Spirit invites you to do. Recall what the exercise, *Walk Into the Future*, may have opened for you in order to help with clarity and provide a way of measuring together how a common vision may be enacted (60-75 minutes). If you are working with more than a single design group, you should take some time to visit each group’s design concepts and ideas. Groups may host “ambassadors” from other design teams. This further facilitates a generative design process and shared leadership of your vision and goals.

3. **Settling on One Main Idea.** Choose one idea or design statement that most faithfully embodies what you want to bring to action. This involves careful listening to one another — to discern that common compelling vision and the means of acting together (90 minutes suggested maximum).

4. **Designing your Prototype.** What can you do in the next 45-60 days to bring your goal to life in your church or ministry? Carefully review the steps and questions of *Creating a Blueprint for Action* on the following page. This part of your process will probably take at least two hours or the remaining design studio time.

5. **Testing your Prototype.** Discover feasibility for your prototype by giving a hearing. If you are a single team, find others in the congregation — vestry, church board, parish council, Christian Ed or other committee — to serve as hearers. If there are multiple design teams, present to one another. Your collaboration in this work will facilitate an appreciative reception for your designs. This exercise will also strengthen your presentation with others in your context who have yet to engage VocationCARE. Ask listeners what they see or hear in your prototype that strikes them as *prophetic* and feasible.

6. **Implementing your Prototype.** The courage gathered through the “CARE” practices, especially the “E,” finds its true embodiment in your implementation. You are sharing the fruits of your prior engagement of VocationCARE. This requires its own kind of courage but it also contains a particular joy — showing what is possible for communities willing to follow the Holy Spirit by listening for how the Spirit sounds through one another’s lives and calls us to deeper collective courage in the work of incarnating God’s love in the world.
Tips for Brainstorming

1. **Defer judgment**: There are no bad ideas at this point.

2. **Encourage wild ideas**: It’s the wild ideas that often create real innovation.

3. **Build on the ideas of others**: Think in terms of “and” instead of “but.” If you dislike someone’s idea, challenge yourself to build on it and make it better.

4. **Stay focused on the topic**: You will get better output if everyone is disciplined.

5. **Be visual**: Try to engage the logical and the creative side of your brain.

6. **One conversation at a time**: Allow ideas to be heard and built upon.

7. **Let ideas flow quickly**: Let your ideas come quickly and naturally and remember there is no need to make a lengthy case for your idea since no one is judging.

**DESIGN STUDIO:**
Creating a Blueprint for Action

As you create your blueprint, use the questions below to think through all the necessary components of your idea and your plan to make it happen.

- **Who** is our target audience? Who do we want to engage or impact?
  Who do we want to participate? Who will be resistant?
- **What** is our goal?
- **What** do we want our prototype to look like? Think of tactics in chronological sequence (first, next, then …) Your prototype will adapt the VocationCARE approach and practices. Consider these questions as you design a prototype for your strategy.
  1. **Is it relevant** (does it matter)?
  2. **Is it right** (does it address the root causes of the things we have to let go of in order to achieve our vision)?
  3. **Is it revolutionary** (is it new; could it empower us and others, including young people and adults, to live more fully into what is genuine in us and in them)?
  4. **Is it rapid** (can we develop experiments right away)?
5. **Is it rough** (can we do it on a small scale right where we are in our respective contexts)?
6. **Is it relationally effective** (does it leverage the strengths, interests, competencies and possibilities of our networks and communities)?
7. **Is it replicable** (can we take it to scale in different contexts over time)?

- **When:** What time or season of the year will we implement? When will we begin and end?
- **Where:** What location will we use? Where are the opportunities?
- **How:** What support and resources do we need? Whose endorsement would help?

We hope you experience the VocationCARE practices as important disciplines for forming, caring for and inspiring Christian community.

Caring for the vocation of young adults in your community builds capacity and cultivates conditions that serve the spiritual journeys of young people and of congregations. This includes tapping into abilities for shared leadership.

The church environment is changing dramatically. We need the assurance we are not left alone as we imagine together what God might be up to. This involves engaging the truth of our lives.

VocationCARE gives to the church the power to engage this truth together. It indicates that — more urgently than ever — our common task is to call young leaders, renew the church and change the world.

“This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world but rather tries to be a part of the process through which the world is transformed.”

**Gustavo Gutiérrez**

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