

Shaping a Faithful Life

Discernment and Discipleship for Young Adults

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Morehouse Publishing
NEW YORK

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Church Publishing Incorporated
19 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016

Cover design by Jennifer Kopec, 2Pug Design
Typeset by Progressive Publishing Services

A record of this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN-13: 978-1-64065-443-3 (pbk.)

*For David and Sarah
In shared adulthood*

Contents

Acknowledgments and Permissions	ix
Introduction	xi
Session I Profile and Purpose	1
Session II The Passion Question	17
Session III The People Question	35
Session IV The Practice Question	45
Session V The Prayer Question	65
Session VI Imaging Vocation	81
Session VII Discipline, Discipleship, Discernment	97
Appendix: Scripture Passages on the Call of God	123
Notes	125
Further Reading on Discernment	127

Acknowledgments and Permissions

This project has emerged over many years, beginning with a grant from the Episcopal Evangelical Education Society that enabled me to test and develop these materials with a number of different young adult groups. I am grateful to all the young adults who have shared their stories and tried out these practices with me over the years: the Progressive Christian Young Adults groups at Vienna Baptist Church; the campus communities of Brent House at the University of Chicago; the Canterbury Club at Michigan State, and the University of Maryland College Park; the clergy friends who supported me in this work, especially Stacy Alan, Kit Carlson, Peter Antoci, and Jenifer Gamber; and the Center for Lifetime Learning at Virginia Theological Seminary, led by Diane Wright and Lisa Kimball, where I have had regular opportunities to invite people into these practices. We learn so much from one another's stories and this whole project has been a rich collaboration.

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Kathleen Henderson Staudt, "In the Cool of the Evening," in *Annunciations: Poems Out of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018).

Kathleen Henderson Staudt, "Reveling," in *Good Places: Poems* (Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2017).

Kathleen Henderson Staudt, "Unknowing," in *Good Places: Poems* (Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2017).

Kathleen Henderson Staudt, "Stumbling Credo" (unpublished poem, 2019).

Introduction

If you are in your twenties or thirties – whether a student, entering the workforce, on your own for the first time, or perhaps living with family while trying to figure out “what’s next” – chances are that you are vividly aware of life questions about meaning, purpose, and identity. When these questions loom large, it helps to find and connect with others at the same stage of life who are asking similar questions.

Down through the ages, our Christian tradition has invited people to approach these questions by “discernment” – the spiritual practice of attending to God’s presence and desire in the choices life presents to us. This workbook is designed to engage you in various approaches to discernment as you seek to explore the deep questions of meaning and purpose that have always been at the heart of the Christian journey. You can use it on your own or, perhaps better, as the core of a conversation with others at a similar stage of life and on the same journey. Along the way, we will see how the practice of discernment nourishes and informs the call to faithful living that the tradition has called “discipleship.”

Young Adults and “Church”

As you seek companions in this process of discernment, you may find that people in their twenties and thirties who are drawn to a church-identified community often have little in common aside from the fact that they all are in this group. Their lives may or may not intersect in any other way. Some may be married, some single; their professions, interests, and temperaments may be quite different. Yet for some reason, they are all being drawn to something that the church may have to offer.

This series of workshops invites young adults to pay attention to the deep questions they are asking as they seek to shape a faithful life, and to see where their particular experiences meet the call to transformation that is at the heart of Christian faith.

We know that adults tend to learn the tradition not so much by receiving instruction as by sharing with one another the parts of it that make sense of their lives, and by working with mentors who can talk freely about ways that scripture, liturgy, and the life of prayer are alive and meaningful in their lives. Accordingly, this set of resources invites a series of questions that can lead to conversation about the resources that Christian faith offers for shaping a faithful life. I have tested these both with campus ministry groups and with parish-based young adult groups. In both contexts, participants have found that the process of focusing on questions, rather than answers, is an effective way to enter a deepening practice of discernment in community, and to open up new visions of what a faithful and meaningful life looks like.

Discernment and Discipleship: Defining the Words

Discernment and *discipleship* may not be terms that are familiar to everyone, so let's start with some definitions. *Discernment* comes from a Latin root that point to a process of sorting out, distinguishing among options. *Discernment* is the practice of attending to God's presence and seeking direction, not only at times of urgent decision making but, indeed, at all times in our lives. Discernment involves asking questions whose answers we're not sure about. We may even be so afraid of the answers that we hesitate to ask the questions: Should I choose this path rather than that one? What is the meaning of the experience I am having? What is the most faithful choice in this situation? Christian traditions of discernment almost always involve conversations with others who are on the same journey. The Ignatian tradition does this in consultation with a spiritual guide or director; Benedictine discernment is practiced in the context of community life and meditation on scripture; Quakers seek clarity through prayerful listening and consultation with a "clearness committee" (the model for what I will call a "clarity team"). *Shaping a Faithful Life* adapts methods from these and other approaches to discernment in order to help you see what rich resources Christian spiritual practice offers for the questions most central to your life.

Discipleship: The Shape of a Faithful Life

An important outcome of faithful discernment is greater commitment to discipleship – to a way of life informed by practices that help us to “follow Jesus” as we come to know his presence in our lives. This is the journey of every Christian, of course: to discern how I, in particular, am called to live out my faith. In early adulthood, it’s important to explore our language about discipleship and to ask questions: What does it mean to follow Jesus in our time? What doesn’t it mean? Because these are important questions at every stage of the life of faith, each session of this program includes invitations to study scripture, especially the stories and teachings of Jesus, to help you articulate and ask more deeply what difference it makes to choose the biblical story, especially the Jesus story, as the story that can make sense of your life experience. Using these resources, the program invites you to ask: What is the work that God is doing in the broken world of today? And what is my piece of that work?

Meaning-Making in the Now: Identity and Community

Sociologist Sharon Daloz¹ reminds us that, for younger adults especially, faith is not always about “belief” but is rather a process of “meaning-making.” The journey of faith is a journey toward making sense of our world, beginning where we are. As you enter and claim adulthood, it is important to find safe places to sort out your own ways of making sense of the world. You may need to ask honestly, for example: How is my lived experience different from traditions I’ve inherited from my family, and from the many voices in the surrounding culture that seek to define me? What can I really claim as my own particular identity, in a culture where I am labeled in all kinds of ways – as a member of a generation (Gen X, Gen Y, Millennials, Gen Z) – as a cohort of consumers? These understandings of common values of a cohort may seem to be important steps in the journey of identity formation and of faith, but most people as they enter adulthood also need, and seem to crave, invitations to ask deeper and more fundamental questions like: Who am I now? What is it about me that I can claim apart from the expectations of others? What and whom do I love? Where is my passion? And how does all this connect to my deepest values, to my life of faith?

Parks² points out that for many young adults there are two great yearnings working together: the desire to claim individual agency or

identity, and the desire to belong to a community. Social media has recognized this by encouraging people to build or identify a “profile” – a face they present to the world – and to join “groups” and “networks” and make “friends.” This vocabulary is an everyday tool nowadays for most people born after 1985.³ You’ve probably noticed that often young adults can be together in the same room and yet also connected to conversations on smartphones and computers with the world outside the room. Older adults may deplore this, but it is actually a condition of people’s lives now. It is possible to be in constant contact with a wide variety of voices. But many young adults I’ve talked to also express a desire for ways to be present to one another “in the room” (even if it is a Zoom room!). Some even suggest that this ability to be present to others is a skill they fear they are losing.

What you may crave is what Parks calls a “hearth” – a place of community and safety where you can rest from the challenges of the surrounding culture, which so importantly shapes early adulthood, and be fully yourself with a group of trusted friends and mentors, in a safe and welcoming place. The materials provided here are designed to guide the conversation for groups of young adults gathered around whatever hearth the church provides for them, as they explore their own approaches to the task of shaping a faithful life. But they can also be used for an individual process of discernment, with invitations to write for personal reflection or to guide a conversation with a friend or a mentor.

The Shape of this Workbook

Shaping a Faithful Life provides a framework for young adults to explore six key questions that can help them make the connections between faith and practice that shape a meaningful life, drawing on the resources of Christian tradition. If you use it in a group, you can just agree to work through this book together, with time in between for individual reflection, or you may work with a facilitator, using additional resources provided electronically. Following is a summary of the steps in this process.

In session I, the concept of discernment is introduced, as a practice that invites us not so much to seek answers as to ask questions in the context of a life of faith. Six basic reflection questions are introduced in this session, and session I focuses on the first two questions. The questions are:

- *The Profile Question*: What do you “do”? How do you answer this question at a social gathering (how do you describe your professional or “public” identity)? This may or may not be closely related to the next question.
- *The Purpose Question*: What is your “real work”? Or, to put it another way, what work, when you are doing it, makes you feel that you are most fully and truly yourself?
- *The Passion Question* is the focus of session II: In the world of work, community, and relationships where you find yourself, what do you feel must change? This question invites you to explore a vision for the world—what writers including Verna Dozier, Desmond Tutu, and Michael Curry have called the “dream of God” for a particular situation.
- *The People Question*, in session III, looks at relationships and community, and offers a structure for engaging in discernment with a group of people through a “clarity team”—a time-limited process based on the Quaker practice of the “clearness committee.”
- *The Practice Question*, the focus of session IV, asks about the activities or practices you engage in to help you live a life that matches your values around time, money, relationships, and the needs of others.
- *The Prayer Question*, in session V, introduces two broadly defined approaches to prayer that I classify as “showing up” prayers and “paying attention” prayers. Two guided meditations invite you to experience these approaches to prayer.

Session VI uses poetry and some personal storytelling to offer some fresh images of vocation and invite you to reflect further on how you have experienced God’s call over the course of your life so far.

Session VII gathers our emerging responses to all these questions and explores how discernment informs a life of discipleship. Using scripture and several approaches to a life review, this closing session will challenge you to begin constructing a “rule of life”—a simple set of practices that will help you to continue to listen to God’s presence and call in your life going forward.

Each session includes an invitation to Bible study, a time to delve into one or more of the discernment questions, and one or more invitations to practice, including some classic practices that have shaped the Christian tradition for centuries and are being reclaimed in our time.

The chapters that follow are labeled “sessions” because I imagine them as time that a reader may spend either alone or, ideally, with a group.

Finally, I want to note that young adults are *adults*, and that many of the materials and practices offered here can be adapted to other ages and stages of adult life, or even used in intergenerational groups.