

## **Grace and Vocation: *Ministry Focus-Strategy-Practice***

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**Abstract:** Convinced that a theology of “moralistic, therapeutic deism” dominates contemporary worldviews, values, and lifestyles, Westwood Lutheran Church has committed to a distinctly different path that crosses the divide between faith and daily life. The congregation is on a journey of deeply engaging its theological roots of grace and vocation. This article argues that a deep, long-term engagement with Luther’s understanding of vocation, centered in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, holds great promise for faithful and effective mission and ministry that engages real life. The article also describes the journey’s emerging outcomes, new questions and next steps.

### ***Pervasive Faith and Life Disconnection***

Over four years ago Westwood Lutheran Church launched a congregational focus on Luther’s understanding of vocation. As one element of a fall preaching and small group series, we formed a small affinity group of business owners and entrepreneurs. The idea was to work the preaching and small group themes into this group’s professional experience.

At the outset we asked each of the group’s members for a written response to the question: “How do you see your professional lives as part of your larger call to serve the neighbor and the world God loves?” Even though most of the group’s responses were quite similar, one man’s statement stood out. He wrote: “It is entirely too noble an idea to suggest that my work is a calling.” This came from a lifelong active Lutheran. He had been a regular worshipper and had been in leadership positions in other congregations prior to his coming to Westwood. He had a vital prayer life and had been an active participant in the faith journeys of his two children, who had served as church camp counselors and had active faith lives. This was a person who had been at the center of faith, yet he did not believe that his work and his faith had much to do with each other.

Many of the questions with which we are still working almost 5 years later emerged from this small group. We are asking: “How did he (and so many others in our congregation) come to believe that there was such disconnect between faith and major parts of their lives? What are the messages in our larger society that have promoted this? What does this say about how we have been functioning as a church? It was clear that we had not been counteracting the worldview that portrays faith and real life as having little to do with each other. The most provocative and challenging question was: Have we—through our worship, language, and practices—been making the problem worse? If so, what does this mean?”

## ***Factors Contributing to a Focus on Grace and Vocation***

Two factors influenced the congregation's decision to focus long term on grace and vocation as a framework for addressing these faith and life questions.

The first factor: In the mid-2000s there was significant turnover in our congregation's Children, Youth, and Family (CYF) Ministry staff. The congregation decided to evaluate and reassess its mission and ministries in CYF prior to hiring new fulltime staff. We consulted studies and books to get a sense of the challenges and opportunities. One of the most influential resources was *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenager* by Christian Smith, based on the findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion, a research project across denominations, races, and classes across the U.S. from 2001-2005.

Two findings from this book influenced our focus on grace and vocation that was to start 10 years later. First, the study found that by and large adolescents reflect the spirituality of their parents and congregation (if they are part of one). In other words, what is found among youth will tell much about the adults' faith. Second, the book argues that a dominant "mush" theology has emerged across denominations and demographics. The authors named this "moralistic, therapeutic, deism." The book lists the following five tenets of this mush theology:

- A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.<sup>1</sup>

When we evaluated our young people's learning and experience, it was clear that this theology was alive and well in their faith and lives. This meant that the same theology was also alive and well in the parents of our young people as well as within the congregation as a whole. From that point on, addressing these faith and life questions became one of the defining challenges for our congregation's ministry. Our decision to focus deeply on Luther's understanding of vocation is one of our core responses to engaging this thoroughgoing challenge.

The second factor involved changes in focusing and structuring our congregational program year. In response to our learnings from the Children, Youth, and Family Ministry assessment, we decided to teach the basics of the faith. We no longer could assume the majority of the congregation knew Scripture and the articles in the Catechism. In the ensuing

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press 2005) 162-163.

years, we had 3 “Years of the Bible”, a “Year of the Large Catechism,” and a year in which we used Westwood’s vision statement to explore “the role and purpose of the church.” In each of the years, we took an integrated approach that connected worship, preaching, education, written curriculum, and small groups during designated periods of each year. As a result, the congregation and the staff developed a culture that worked the basics of faith with a focus and pattern that invited the congregation and others to deep exploration of the building blocks of faith over concentrated periods of time.

At the end of nearly a decade of focus on Bible, Lutheran theology, and the purpose and role of the church, we asked, “So what now?” One argument proposed that we needed a “Year of Service,” that is, many opportunities for people to do things in the community. While the idea was initially attractive, in consultations among leader and conversations among the congregation the proposal raised more and more difficult questions and strategic issues. People told us how busy they were. In such an effort, would staff put a great amount of effort into preparing programs and practices that people would not have time to do?” Moreover, we had named the Moralistic, Therapeutic, Deism worldview challenge; would a “Year of Service” address this challenge or just make it worse?

We had come to understand the important role and purpose of the church in engaging our larger community. Would a “Year of Service” lead us to more deeply engage our larger community as individuals and as a congregation? Or would it substitute surface work for transformation of individual and congregation worldviews that would genuinely lead to more substantial and faithful impact in our community over the long term? Most of all, there emerged these questions: “What about everyone’s daily life relationships? Are not each person’s relationships and roles at work, at school, in their families, as a neighbor, as a friend, and as a citizen the most important places of calling and influence? Might this emphasis on service in the community actually exacerbate the problems we had discovered?”

After much prayer and conversation, we rejected the “Year of Service” idea and turned to Luther’s understanding of vocation and its relationship to our understanding of grace. After much exploration and deliberation, we committed to this direction. It became clear that this was a significant way to address the challenges we had named as a congregation. Moreover, this would take time and focus. This would be the framework for mission and ministry long term. In other words, this would not just be a theme for 1-2 years.

## **Considerations and Commitments**

As we proceeded, basic considerations and commitments guided our intentions and practices.

- This would be first and foremost praxis, that is, a theological journey carried out in ways that actual matter in people’s everyday lives.

- The pastoral leaders would be clear about the message we would communicate in worship and elsewhere. Our primary task would be to proclaim Christian identity found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; that in the waters of Holy Baptism, each person has been claimed by God’s grace alone and called to lives of service for the well-being of our neighbor and the world God loves. Then we would consistently ask: “What does this mean”? This is a question we as pastors would not be able to answer on our own. We would need to be in dialogue with the members of the congregation in each of their daily callings in order to explore the meaning and implications of living life for the neighbor and the world God loves. For pastors to act as “the answer givers” would be a huge mistake.
- We made a commitment to specificity. We committed to finding ways to engage specific questions, doubts, and ambiguities in people’s real lives. We have come to believe that the church is often vague in what it addresses and how it speaks. This vagueness has only exacerbated the sense that faith does not have much to do with real life.
- To engage real questions, doubts, and ambiguities authentically and honestly the congregation needed to continue to cultivate a culture of grace, a process that was already underway. The congregation previously had an honor and shame culture that kept many people from trusting that the church was a safe space to be real. To engage real life questions in all the realms of our lives would necessitate an authenticity that can only occur in a culture of grace. We would be a place where anyone could speak honestly about joys and challenges, successes and failures, sin and redemption, always with the certainty that they are claimed by the love of God in Jesus Christ and, in different ways, called to all the realms of life.
- Our working understanding of vocation would embrace both the individual and communal aspects of our journey. Each of us as individuals is called in each of our vocations for the sake of the neighbor. Our community of faith is called as well.
- We also were concerned about the distortions of a certain popular understandings of calling. There are both religious and secular arguments that claim that calling and purpose are found by either focusing on one realm of life, for example, one’s job or family, or by leaving something behind to find a more impactful or better fitting role. Secularly, this is often the idea that one needs to find one’s passion in order to have a meaningful life. In religious terms, it is often the idea of “dropping one’s nets” and going somewhere else, so that one can truly “follow Jesus.” While this might be the case for some, we believe this is too narrow as a primary focus. Our overarching message would be that “where you are is where you are called now.” There is no time in which we are not called.

## **Ministry Content and Practices**

This is a summary of our ministry activities over the past 4 years through the lens of grace and vocation. There was not a “grand plan.” The direction of each year was established at the end of the previous year through prayerful evaluation of what had occurred, what questions were emerging, and what opportunities presented themselves.

### **Year 1—Vocation: Faith as a Way of Life**

The goal in year one was to teach a new (old) language. Prior to this year we had debates about what word we would use for this focus on vocation. Purpose? Calling? Passion? Vocation? All seemed to have baggage and there were often various definitions of each term that might—or might not—express what we meant. It was decided that the best word to use was vocation, the word that had been there all along in the faith community.

We quickly realized that we could not trust that everyone knew what vocation meant or if we all had the same definition. Thus, the first goal was to teach the language over the course of year one. It was the only way we as a congregation could understand each other. In Year 1 we sought to establish a clear congregational definition of the words “grace” and “vocation”.

There were three main components in the first year.

- A Reader. We initially searched for a book that the congregation could read to provide focus and content. While we found helpful material, no one book did what we wanted. Therefore, we compiled a 5-week Reader that contained a scriptural theme, several articles, and small group questions for each week. The themes of the 5 weeks were “Freed to Love,” “What Vocation is Not,” “The Compartmentalized Life,” “Being a Steward,” and “The Messiness of Vocation.” The Scripture and theme were the focus of the sermon for the week and the congregation was invited to join weekly small groups studying each topic. Our Children, Youth, and Family ministries also followed these weekly themes.
- Epiphany Retreats. To further embed grace and vocation in the life of the congregation, we scheduled Friday night through Saturday morning in-town retreats for each age group. The retreats were moderately well-attended. Discoveries from two groups stood out.
  - Seniors – Elders. As opposed to our larger society that suggests that retired persons have done their major life work and can now “relax on the sidelines,” Luther’s idea of vocation affirms the opposite. Elders have a critical role in the life of society, families, churches, and community. This group was re-engaged and energized by this retreat.
  - Empty Nesters. When introducing themselves at the retreat almost all said something like this. “Hello, my name is...My kids are out of the house and frankly I’m not really sure who I am anymore.” Certainly, Luther’s understanding of vocation points to callings that include family, but there is so much more. This

retreat expanded the understanding of their present purposes and opportunities for real impact.

- Lenten Focus: “Things We Don’t Talk about in Church”. This Lenten focus was less directly about defining vocation and more about two conditions that need to be present in a congregational culture that takes seriously the Christian life as vocation. First, the focus was about ongoing development of a culture of grace and authenticity. Second, it affirmed that each of us experience brokenness, the effects of sin (others and our own), pain, and suffering. Nevertheless, we are not “damaged goods,” rather we are all broken, sinful people who are also fully claimed in Jesus name and called to be God’s people in all the realms of our lives. At our 5 Wednesday night Lenten services we did interview sermons with members of the congregation on “messy, real life” topics.
  - Loneliness: A woman who had a miscarriage related her experience over the months that followed.
  - Financial challenges: A man who works in the financial sector spoke about his experience of bankruptcy.
  - Addiction: A person struggling with addiction and a woman who grew up in the household of an addict.
  - Mental illness: A woman who lives with depression.
  - Busyness: A couple with 3 children spoke about the complexities of navigating life.

## **Year 2—God’s Story, Our Story, My Story**

As we came to the end of the first year, it was clear that the concepts of grace and vocation with their language and implications for daily life were taking root. A survey of the congregation indicated that grace and vocation were understood and informing people’s daily lives more deeply. Where should we go next? As we evaluated what had happened and attempted to learn from year 1, we kept pushing the question of how we might deepen and broaden this conversation?

As we deliberated next steps, we were influenced by the writings of Douglas John Hall<sup>2</sup> and a TED talk by David Isay<sup>3</sup>, the creator of Story Corp. We concluded that meaning-making was one of the biggest challenges for understanding that each of us is called to be God’s hands and feet in the world. We saw this challenge in questions like: “Does my life matter or am I just an insignificant cog in the wheel of life? Is God really a part of my story? Am I really a participant in God’s ongoing story for the sake of the world God loves?” Our goals for this year were to engage these and other questions of meaning through the medium of story.

- Lead-up to the Fall Reader. From our evaluation of the previous year, we sensed that we could do more to set up the Reader and Small Groups. Leading up to the use of the

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in our Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 129

<sup>3</sup> David Isay, *Everyone around you has a story the world needs to hear* (TED 2015)

Reader and Small Groups, we preached for five weeks on Genesis 1 and 2. From the first words of Scripture we presented Biblical assertions that each of our lives matter. We stressed: Humanity is created to participate in God's story just as God is committed to participate in humankind's story.

- 5-Week Fall Reader. We again constructed a 5-week reader; this year we provided on-line resources as well as written. We also designed the small groups to culminate in a congregation-wide people of faith story-telling exercise. The preaching, reader, and small group themes were "Storied Waters," "Swept up in God's Story," "Your Story is Bigger than You," "Our Stories are Messy," and "Telling Your Story." During the 5 weeks we also shared at worship taped interviews of members of the congregation speaking on some aspect of their journey of life as people of faith (similar to what Story Corp does).
- Advent. One of the venues through which "stories" are told for some individuals and families is the annual Christmas letter. We invited the congregation to join in writing an alternative Christmas letter that was not based on the busyness of their lives or all their accomplishments but on something that was authentic to their experience (or struggle) as people called to be God's hands and feet in all the realms of their lives.
- Lent. Utilizing Atul Gwande's book *Being Mortal*, we designed a book study and a thematic Wednesday night worship series.<sup>4</sup> The goal was to engage questions of vocation to accompany those who are dying as well as the questions about *the vocation of the dying*. Each Wednesday night included an interview sermon with a member of the congregation.

### **Year 3—Listening: God's Story in the Neighborhood**

In Year 1 we established grace and vocation's basic content and vocabulary. Year 2 addressed through story the question of meaning-making prevalent in society. In Year 3 we turned to listening, one of the most important skills in living life for the sake of the neighbor and the world God loves. We called it a spiritual discipline.

- Lead-up to the Fall Reader and Small Groups. As a lead-up to the use of the reader and the small groups, we planned a 4 week preaching series exploring the Tower of Babel story in Genesis and the Pentecost story in Acts. We utilized Biblical scholars, such as Eric Barreto, who suggest that both texts affirm and celebrate the diversity of the world and the importance of our neighbor's story in God's ongoing work for the sake of the world.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Atul Gwande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters at the End* (New York: Metropolitan, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Eric Barreto, "What Happened at Pentecost" Enter the Bible from Luther Seminary. May 1, 2013

- Fall Reader. This Reader was like the previous two years in format. The titles of the 5 weeks were “The Danger of a Single Story,” “Listening is Messy,” “The Practice of Listening,” “God Listens,” and “What Do You Hear?”
- Epiphany. The theme was “My Neighbor is Muslim.” There were two parts to this work during Epiphany.
  - Sunday Adult Forums: We worked with a local Imam to create a series to inform our congregation about Islam in a time when Muslims were being characterized in many different ways, some of them quite negative. The series culminated with a visit to a local Mosque and sharing a meal with participants at the Mosque. An average of 300 people attended each week; it was by far the largest attended adult forum series in a long time.
  - Sunday Worship: At the same time, we focused on core confessions of Christianity using I Corinthians to invite congregants to become clearer about our identity as Christians, even as we learned about the identity of our Muslim neighbors.

#### **Year 4—Re-Formation**

We chose to focus on the 500<sup>th</sup> year of the Reformation. At the same time the goal for this year was to further develop our engagement with grace and vocation. Our intent was to use this commemoration to review and further build upon what had occurred over the previous 3 years.

- Fall Small Groups and Preaching focus. We chose not to do a 4<sup>th</sup> reader for several reasons (chief of which was the amount of time it took to put it together). Instead we chose 5 core theological confessions coming out of the Reformation and engaged each one of them for 2 Sundays. The preacher each week was asked to prepare a small group curriculum based on the topic and sermon for each week. In our evaluation we learned that this approach was effective. Somewhat to our surprise, we learned that spending two weeks on a theological confession along with sermons from two different preachers was strongly affirmed as an effective way to connect more deeply to these core confessions. The topics and subtitles were:
  - Justification: “The Challenge of Guilt”
  - Justification: “The Challenge of Meaning”
  - *Sola Scriptura*: “Can We Trust All to Read It?”
  - *Sola Scriptura*: “Does It Matter Anymore?”
  - Stewardship: “Away from Indulgences”
  - Stewardship: “Being a Catalyst for What Matters”
  - Vocation: “The Priesthood of All Believers”
  - Vocation: “Called to Ventures of which We Cannot See the Ending”
  - The Theology of the Cross: “The Challenge of the Theology of Glory”
  - The Theology of the Cross: “The Challenge of Functional Deism”



- Epiphany. Retirement and Work Affinity Groups: One of our suspicions has been that we have planned and conducted worship, so as to inadvertently exacerbate the notion that we are not God's hands and feet in our real lives. One place this can occur is during Epiphany.

Every year we have Sundays in which we hear of Jesus calling his disciples to "drop their nets and follow him." These sermons tend to include illustrations of people having radical changes in their lives and serving God in moving and obvious ways. These are great sermons, but fact is that 99% of the people in our congregations will be getting up on Monday to lives that are the same as the previous Monday. They are not making huge changes in their lives and can easily be left with the sense that their lives are not in any real sense a calling. In Mark's Gospel the "drop their nets" story (Mark 1:16-20) contains a line about two of the disciples leaving their father Zebedee and the hired men behind in the fishing boat to follow Jesus. Is there a hierarchy of discipleship portrayed in this story? That, of course, has never been our confession. But our sense is that many of our people inadvertently heard that. For instance, the question could be asked: "Is Zebedee, who continues his job as a fisherman, not also a disciple or is he a lesser disciple?" We would never purposely state that. Yet, if we are not clear we have a problem. Because the biblical character most members would relate to in the story is likely Zebedee, who after the story will be getting up the next day to make a living by fishing.

To further address this challenge, we formed Professional Affinity Groups that met 5 weeks during Epiphany. We formed a total of 8 affinity groups: Business Entrepreneurs, Corporate, Finance, Education, Health Care, Non-Profit, and a Catch-all group (for everyone who did not fit in the others) as well as holding retreats for a retirement group and a group of our Senior High Youth. The small groups combined conversations about the real experience of their professional lives with materials that provided theological understandings of vocation and resources that made the connection of meaning and work. We learned much in these small groups that we are still processing. Here are two observations.

Among the groups, the helping professions (Education, Healthcare, and Non-Profit) quickly understood that they are called. We also discovered that burnout is a huge issue for these groups.

Among other professional groups, despite more than 3 years of working assertions and understandings that each person is called to be God's hands and feet in all their roles in life, this was the first time that some had considered that this included their own professional lives. This was most true for those whose jobs were furthest removed from dealing with customers and clients and for those who felt that their work allowed little creativity. Many of them—some regular worship attenders—believed that people are disciples only when they are either doing something overtly religious (like inviting

someone to church) or when they are doing something remarkable or grand (starting a hospital in another country). They had barely begun to imagine that discipleship or vocation could include their own work. We are still asking: How do we keep working to bridge this divide in people's imagination?

Not surprisingly, "busyness" of one degree or another is a defining factor for many seeking to live for the sake of neighbor and the world God loves. This raises two significant questions. First question: How do we walk alongside people who are so busy? Second question: How can we be a congregation that invites people to reflect on why they are so busy? Is that just the way it is? Or does some of this come from making choices based on a worldview that is different from the one based on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

The Retirement group had interest in this conversation regarding all life, everyday real life as vocation. They have been told that their most "useful" years are behind them and many have internalized that message. The idea that they are called was enlivening for this group.

We continue to wonder: How do we go deeper with these understandings of vocation with these greatly disparate professional groups?

- Lent: The theme was "My Neighbor is Jewish": Our goal during this Lenten season was twofold. First, as in the previous year, we wanted the congregation to learn more about the faith of our neighbors. Moreover, our congregation is located in a community that has a strong Jewish population. Second, and more importantly, we wanted to engage the dark side of our history as Lutherans in relation to our Jewish neighbors starting with Luther's words during the Reformation and their use in the Holocaust.

While several activities were scheduled, this effort focused on Sunday morning education between services (again we experienced a much higher attendance than normal similar to the previous series on Islam). We drew upon a local Luther scholar and a local Rabbi to create this series. Our preaching during Lent was strongly influenced by the series. The congregation learned about our Lutheran history and many were able to relate that history to questions of today. The congregation grew in their sense of our communal vocation. The series ended with a Wednesday service of remembrance and repentance related to *Kristallnacht*, and with a group from the congregation visiting the Holocaust museum in Washington D.C.

- Post-Easter: We held the Parable of the Talents Challenge—Re-Forming Stewardship. After Easter, the congregation engaged a challenge to raise funds for a dental clinic in Dodoma, Tanzania where the congregation has partner relationships. \$10,000 in small amounts was handed out to individuals in the congregation and each person was invited to use their talents to multiply the funds. \$51,000 was gathered and sent to the dental clinic. During these weeks, we did a preaching series on stewardship and invited the

congregation to share insights on how Westwood could better engage this dimension of our calling.

## **The Prayer of Good Courage**

The focus on grace and vocation has impacted elements of our worship. While those worshipping with us would still experience many familiar components of an ELCA worship service, subtle, yet significant changes have occurred. For example, you may come on a Sunday in which there is an interview sermon or notice that the Sunday you are there is part of a larger series that may or may not use the lectionary.

What you will most consistently notice is the prayer at the end of each Sunday worship service. In Year 1 we started closing our service with an affirmation of our vocations by the whole assembly. In Year 2 we closed the service with the Prayer of Good Courage, intending to do something different each year. The prayer quickly captured people's imagination and the spirit of our work on grace and vocation and became not only a sending prayer, but a confession of who we are and who God is among us. Here is the prayer:

O God you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending by paths as yet untrodden through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>6</sup>

A seminary student recently wrote a paper on Westwood. She identified the Prayer of Good Courage as the congregation's primary ritual. She wonders if more people know this prayer from memory than the Lord's Prayer (while an overstatement, the point is well taken). We printed copies of the prayer on small cards for the congregation; we have had to reorder them several times because people are giving them to friends and relatives. We are surprised how often the prayer has been shared in Christmas letters and on other occasions. It is the prayer we pray at the close of most meetings at church and it is starting to be requested for weddings and funerals. It has become the grace and vocation prayer that has captured our congregation's imagination and defined the lens through which we see God, ourselves, and our lives as servants of Christ.

## **Results and Impact**

I recently asked a member how Westwood has been affected by the focus on vocation." She responded: "Westwood has added 'grit to grace.'" The response surprised me. When I pressed her, she explained that the congregation has become much more connected to the grittiness of real life with its challenges, questions, and ambiguities. For her, in the past she had heard grace spoken and put forward as central to faith, but it had not connected to the realities of her life.

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<sup>6</sup> *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 304.

Hers is probably the most succinct statement of what has happened. As we have reflected, here are some other examples of what has developed over the last four years.

- A new language has formed at Westwood around our identity in Jesus Christ and the call to be God's hands and feet as we serve the thriving of our neighbor and the world that God loves. That language connects to real issues of meaning in our individual lives and the life of our faith community.
- Participants expect more from the congregation. First, they expect that real-life questions will be asked and people will be invited to consider them through the lens of our baptismal identity. Second, they expect depth and focus on the topics we engage. One-time conversations are seen as less helpful. Third, people expect that what has happened in our community, country, and world during the previous week will be acknowledged in the sermon on Sunday.
- The church council has become much clearer in its role of providing leadership in our communal vocation of engaging our larger community. As a result, the horizons and imagination of leadership and individual members of the congregation are expanded.
- There is greater clarity and direction in our mission and ministry strategies and structure. As a result, we have made changes in how our staff functions.
  - Our staff is significantly more collaborative in designing and planning a year's emphasis and patterns further in advance.
  - A shared staff leadership model based more on gifts than on job titles has emerged.
  - The clarity of focus on grace and vocation has increased the imagination and creativity of the staff.
  - There is a sense that we are going somewhere. There is an increased sense of purpose and meaning because we are clearer on direction and because it is more connected to real life.
- Our culture is more gracious and authentic. It is a safer place in which to engage all of life. This has been possible as we have developed a culture that assumes that despite the challenges and short comings of each person's journey all are equally called.
- Westwood has become a more welcoming place. Visitors express that they are welcomed early and often in many ways.

## Ongoing Questions

Like any new endeavor, our journey has been filled with missteps, mistakes, and many lingering questions. Many of our mistakes have been on a practical level related to how we tried to execute ideas. For instance, we thought it was a good idea to have life stage retreats during January of year 1, but with a couple of notable exceptions, several of the retreats got cancelled for lack of registrations. While it may have been a good idea, January has proven NOT to be a good time to plan overnight retreats. Along with the practical learnings, there are several pieces of our overall approach that we continue to wonder about. Here are a few examples from our Sectors of the Economy affinity groups.

- How do we go deep effectively? When we did the evaluation of the Sectors of the Economy affinity groups last year a couple things were clear. First, it was almost unanimous that this was important to participants and that there was plenty still to do in these areas. Second, each of the Sectors of the Economy had unique opportunities and challenges. It was clear that we had the opportunity and challenge of going deeper with each of these groups. This has led to the following questions: How do you go deeper given the real differences that emerged in each sector of the economy? While there can be a few general questions that will work for all the groups, it would be a mistake to not structure the corporate group, for instance, differently than the education group. The joys and challenges are very different. So how do we as staff facilitate that well, especially given that staff do not know the joys and challenges nearly as well as the people in these groups?
- What about breadth? Alongside the question of depth is the issue of breadth. Our theological confession is that each of us is called to be God's hands and feet in each of the realms of our life. Our calling is not just in our work. It includes our involvements in our families, our friendships, as citizens, neighbors, etc. One of the risks we run in going deep with the sectors of the economy groups is that we could leave the impression that our vocation is just about work. How do we make sure we are also engaging the other realms with the specificity and depth that will also be needed there? We have some sense that the way we have structured each year, and the way we have approached preaching in certain seasons, has invited folks to wonder about their calling as citizens with some depth, so we are hopeful that we are addressing this area well. One of our CYF staff people is beginning to explore a more focused, structured approach to the realm of family, which we believe will assist in this area. Still the challenge of engaging all the realms will persist.
- What about faith practices? In one of the affinity groups the following question was raised. "I'm a team leader in my organization. Recently I had to terminate the employment of one of my team members. What does one pray for before I walk into that meeting?" The question revealed what some of our next steps need to be. We have been very cognizant of the challenge of people believing that this confession has anything to do with them at all. In these groups 4 years after we started this process, it appeared that some people were finally beginning for the first time to imagine that we really meant that they were called in their real lives. Only when we got specific did that possibility begin to emerge for some. It is critical that we take seriously how deep the divide is between how folks have seen faith and life. Taking this seriously has been a big part about why this has been so transformative. The critical next step is for us to make sure we are equipping people with faith practices that will support them in their vocations. One of the questions that emerges involves whether or not we could have been more focused on faith practices prior to this or whether the questions that now are emerging suggest that we structured things appropriately.
- Ethics. The same questions can be asked about ethics. During our Lenten series last year on "My Neighbor is Jewish—The Darkside of the Reformation" a quote by one of the leaders has stuck with us on things we need to learn from the Holocaust. He said we

cannot have a “flattened view of vocation.” In explaining, he used the following example. One could have been an excellent employee at a factory in Germany that made the gas used in the extermination camps. On one level, this person could be seen as faithfully living out one’s work vocation. On another level, that is completely false. This, of course, is a much more extreme situation than any of our people are living in. Yet the point is still true for all of us. How do we invite these reflections upon the specific lives of our people in situations that we as leaders may little understand? Part of the answer comes from our learning to ever more deeply engage our people and equip them to frame the appropriate questions for us.

## **So What’s Next?**

As I write this the staff of Westwood is actively working on next year’s engagement of grace and vocation. For the first time we are planning two themes in concert with each other. The title for this coming year will be “Artisans of the Common Good.” The phrase is from the New Year’s Sermon of Pope Francis, which David Brooks wrote about in his article entitled “How Would Jesus Drive.”<sup>7</sup> The following year’s theme will be “The Prayer of Good Courage” in which we hope to dig deeper into the confessions that undergird the prayer that has become so important in the life of our congregation. We believe there are many next steps to come in this journey.

## **Conclusion**

In Galatians the Apostle Paul confesses: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me (2:20).” These are great words that often do not ring true in the experience of Christians. What has been most powerful has been to witness how these words are becoming real for people in a faith community in a first ring suburb in Minnesota. Working Luther’s understanding of grace and vocation has made their life in Jesus Christ more vital. The notion of our dying with Christ and his living in us is beginning to break through the divide between faith and real life. After more than 4 years it is clear that we have only scratched the surface of how deeply one can go with this confession. We are convinced about the importance of this deepening journey into grace and vocation and are committed to continuing.

As the Prayer of Good Courage states, “we have been called to ventures of which we cannot see the end.” This is certainly true. “We pray that God’s hand will be leading and God’s love supporting us through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

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<sup>7</sup> David Brooks “How Would Jesus Drive”? New York Times Jan. 4, 2018