

Vocational Ministry at Oklahoma Christian University: Past, Present, and Future

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For over 20 years, Oklahoma Christian University has been training students for vocational ministry—that is, preparing students for service in the church outside of traditional ministry positions. But as the conversation around vocation and Christian faith has moved from beyond vocational ministry in service of the church to how vocations participate in God’s mission, how do traditional, non-ministry vocations participate in the mission of God? How do we train and prepare students not just for service in the church but to pursue their vocation as a way to participate in God's purposes for the world? This essay will examine how Oklahoma Christian has understood the relationship between ministry and vocation, explore recent trends in scholarship regarding understanding of ministry and vocation, and propose a way forward for OC to understand vocation as ministry—that is, to form students to view their particular vocation as participation in God’s purposes for the world.

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Introduction

Oklahoma Christian University (OC)¹ has had a long history of preparing students for vocations formed by faith and marked by service. In its first year in 1950, the catalog read, “The greatest service [the College] can render is that of . . . preparing [students] for Christian service, regardless of their calling in life.”² Still today, the vision and mission of OC is to “transform lives for Christian faith, scholarship, and service.”³ However, OC has

¹ Oklahoma Christian was first established in Bartlesville, OK, in 1950 as Central Christian College. In 1958, the campus was relocated to its current location in Oklahoma City, OK, and the name was changed to Oklahoma Christian College. OC became a university in 1990.

² Central Christian College, *Academic Catalog* (Edmond: Oklahoma Christian Univ., 1950), 6.

³ Oklahoma Christian University, *2021–22 Undergraduate Academic Catalog* (Edmond, OK: Oklahoma Christian Univ., 2021).

historically limited the definition of ministry to the vocation of full-time ministry (i.e., employment) in a church and more broadly as voluntary service in the church by its members with little connection to vocations outside of traditional church ministry and service roles. This vision ultimately manifested itself in the creation of the Vocational Ministry second major in 1993, offered by the College of Bible. Over the past 20 years, conversations among Christian higher education institutions have shifted to the theological exploration of vocation. These conversations have focused on vocational discernment in terms of personal development and in terms of cultivating the capacity for meaning-making in light of God’s purposes for the world. This essay will examine how Oklahoma Christian has understood the relationship between ministry and vocation, explore recent trends in scholarship regarding the understanding of ministry and vocation, and propose a way forward for OC to understand vocation as ministry—that is, to form students to view their particular vocation as participation in God’s purposes for the world.

Where We’ve Been: Vocational Ministry as Formation

At the founding of OC, there was no clear or intentional integration of faith and vocation. In the mid-twentieth century, it was assumed that if you came to a Christian college like OC, went to chapel, took Bible classes, and went to church, you would be formed by faith. It was also assumed that “since all full-time faculty are practicing Christians, they lead students not only to learn essentials of their academic field, but to understand them in harmony with a Christian worldview.”⁴ However, no pedagogical strategy was implemented across campus in each department to inform how faith informs one’s understanding of their vocation. It was largely left to each department and/or faculty member to teach and exemplify what it meant to be a Christian in a particular discipline or vocation.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a push to integrate faith and academic disciplines because most non-Bible faculty expressed a need to better know how to do this within their disciplines. Dr. Bill Goad, Professor of Business, created several workshops and faculty presentations about how to integrate faith into various disciplines. His vision for faith in the workplace was a revisioning of God’s purposes for work. Work was not a curse, a result of the Fall, but part of God’s intentions for creation. “From the beginning God created [humanity] in his image to be his coworkers in the world,” Goad writes. “Even before there was sin in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were given the job of taking care of the garden that God had planted.”⁵ In other words, God made creation so we can be his coworkers. It was an effort to help students see their work as ministry—not just a

⁴ Stafford North, *Soaring on Wings Like Eagles: A History of Oklahoma Christian University* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Christian University, 2008), 366.

⁵ Bill Goad, “Work is Important to God” (unpublished article, Oklahoma Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, n.d.), 2.

means to ministry, but ministry itself. This vision sought to infuse theological meaning into all work in order to give “dignity to even the most menial tasks and provide an integrative purpose to life.”⁶ Dr. Goad also chaired a core curriculum committee in the early 1990s and was proposing this vision of work as ministry to be a part of the core curriculum revision, but the integration of this vision into specified disciplines was never fully implemented on a systemic level.

From OC’s earliest days, Dr. Stafford North would often say, “Find your ministry!” or “Find your place to serve.” No matter what your vocation was, Dr. North would encourage students to find an area of interest in the church and then find a way to serve in that area. By the 1990s, this sentiment increasingly resonated with students across academic disciplines. The Vocational Ministry second major started in response to students who did not want to major in Bible but wanted to be equipped for ministry in the church, and also in response to current Vocational Ministry majors who wanted to major in something besides Bible but still be Bible students. Dr. Lynn McMillon, OC’s Dean of the College of Bible from 1995–2010, says that Dr. North’s vision “might be the deepest roots of Vocational Ministry (at OC).”⁷ The Vocational Ministry second major sought to prepare students pursuing “careers in non-religious fields . . . but who desire a deeper knowledge of God’s word and ministry in order to strengthen the cause of Christ wherever they live and work.”⁸ It consisted of 16 hours of general education Bible classes and an additional 16 hours of any courses taught by the College of Bible (with the requirement that half were upper division courses and half were textual courses). It helped recruiting in the College of Bible because it appealed to those who wanted to study Bible but also needed a “real way” to earn an income. This resonated with parents who wanted more financial security for their children, which ministry roles sometimes do not provide. Another benefit it offered to students was that they had access to scholarships and independent studies that they wouldn’t have had without a Bible major. It was also a resource for churches, especially smaller ones where active members make a big difference. The overall value of the Vocational Ministry second major was that it provided “psychological empowerment to equip a person to do ministry beyond sitting in a pew.”⁹

Vocational Ministry proved to be a popular option for students who were not traditional Bible majors. McMillon says that it sometimes took “explaining to students how this can equip them to help and serve people,” but so many wanted to pursue the Vocational Ministry second major because “they wanted to serve.”¹⁰ McMillon further comments, “We want to get them to think of themselves as a minister even if they are a nurse, accountant, or engineer.”¹¹ Vocational Ministry as a second major has created a

⁶ Goad, “Work is Important to God,” 3.

⁷ Lynn McMillon, interview by Ben Langford and Peter Cariaga, Oklahoma City, August 20, 2021.

⁸ *2021–22 Undergraduate Academic Catalog*, 34.

⁹ McMillon, interview.

¹⁰ McMillon, interview.

¹¹ McMillon, interview.

strong tradition and robust culture on campus in which students are prepared and equipped to serve in local churches throughout the United States and around the world. This tradition and culture is largely the work and vision of Dr. Lynn McMillon, who worked to create and promote the Vocational Ministry second major.

Students at OC are formed to do ministry in churches “beyond sitting in the pew,” and they can be equipped for greater service through the Vocational Ministry second major; but a question remains: How should students view their non-ministry vocations in light of their faith? In many seminaries and Christian institutions of higher education, the conversations around vocation and Christian faith have moved beyond vocational ministry in service of the church to how vocations participate in the mission of God. How then should OC train and prepare students not just for service in the church but to pursue their vocation as a way to participate in God's purposes for the world? In the following section, we will explore where the conversation is currently in Christian higher education with an eye towards a proposal for how OC may begin to answer the questions posed above.

Where We Are Now: Joining the Larger Conversation about Vocation

While OC's use of “vocational ministry” differs from the way the phrase is used in other contexts—denoting a form of bivocational ministry rather than full-time ministry—the language connects to larger conversations about vocation among seminaries and Christian higher education institutions. The last 20 years in particular have seen these conversations embodied by a remarkable amount of institutional activity and accompanying scholarly literature focused on the theological exploration of vocation.¹² Many of these conversations (and books) center on vocational discernment as the personal path of individuals toward seminary and full-time ministry, but a number of recent discussions approach it as a communal endeavor and see the church as a viable means for making a difference in the world.

One influential perspective, that of vocational discernment as a personal endeavor, is exemplified in two books produced around the turn of the millennium.¹³ One book is Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak*, which invites readers to explore vocation by first turning inward, seeking to tap into each person's God-giftedness that Palmer calls a person's “authentic selfhood.”¹⁴ For Palmer, vocation is not “out there” among those who would shape it in their own image so much as it is “in here,” an original creation gifted by

¹² Much of this literature is documented in the footnotes of this article, though these are meant to be representative and not exhaustive.

¹³ For more on the influence of both Palmer and Fowler on theological discussions of vocational exploration, see Anne Carter Walker and Peter H. Cariaga, “Mixed (Up) and Messy: Culturally Hybrid Proposals for Vocational Exploration,” *Religious Education* 116, no. 5 (2021): 496–99.

¹⁴ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 15.

God.¹⁵ The other exemplar is James Fowler's *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, originally published in 1984 with a revised edition published the same year as Palmer's book.¹⁶ Fowler takes a developmental approach to vocation, building on his previous work on stages of faith development.¹⁷ For Fowler, faith grows across the lifespan but so does vocational discernment, culminating in adulthood as "partnership with God in God's work in the world."¹⁸ Neither Palmer's contemplative understanding of vocation nor Fowler's concept of it as something that develops over the lifespan is entirely novel, but their influence on subsequent literature about vocation has been profound and enduring.

Fowler's influence in particular (or at least strong echoes of it) is evident in a second influential perspective, that of vocational discernment as a developmental endeavor.¹⁹ The true center of gravity for this perspective, however, is the grantmaking initiatives of Lilly Endowment Inc., which since 1998 has been funding programs and research projects²⁰ focused on vocational exploration.²¹ Approaching vocational discernment as a developmental task, the Endowment's earliest vocation initiatives focused on introducing youth to theological education. The scholars associated with those initiatives have produced significant works related to youth ministry and vocational exploration.²² Foremost among these is a volume of essays by directors of Endowment-

¹⁵ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 10.

¹⁶ James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

¹⁷ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981).

¹⁸ Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, 74.

¹⁹ Of note here is Sharon Daloz Parks, whose young adult-focused work is directly connected to Fowler but not to Lilly Endowment-funded initiatives like many that follow below. Parks builds directly on Fowler's five-stage model of faith formation to include young adulthood and sees the central task of this stage, and thus of vocation, as cultivating the capacity for meaning-making. See Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, 10th anniversary ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), x–xi, 11.

²⁰ Particularly prominent in youth ministry literature but adjacent to Lilly Endowment's youth theology initiatives is sociologist Christian Smith's trio of books on young and emerging adults, research for which was funded by the Endowment (all from Oxford University Press): Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (2005); Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (2009); Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hillary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (2011).

²¹ The Endowment had been funding pilot initiatives since 1993, according to the Endowment's former Vice President for Religion Craig Dykstra in his foreword to Kenda Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson, eds., *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education—If We Let It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), xi, xviii. See also Lilly Endowment Inc., *Annual Report 1998* (Indianapolis: Lilly Endowment, 1999), <http://ej.issuelab.org/resources/10103/10103.pdf>.

²² David F. White, a faculty member and founding director of early Lilly Endowment-funded youth theology programs, is an editor of the "Youth Ministry Alternatives" series, a number of which are authored by youth theology program directors and focus on vocation (all from Pilgrim Press in Cleveland, OH): David

funded high school theology programs. In it, editors Kenda Dean and Christy Hearlson argue that these programs approach vocational discernment as a communal, social practice that is done with young people, making it “more than an internal psychological process that helps individual Christians figure out how to use their gifts and time.”²³

Lilly Endowment’s initiatives go further than high school programs, though.²⁴ The year after funding youth theology programs at seminaries, the Endowment made a new round of grants for vocational exploration programs at independent colleges and universities.²⁵ One long-term result of these programs is the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Exploration, or NetVUE, a regranteeing and convening organization designed specifically with undergraduate institutions in mind. Since 2009, the network’s regranteeing efforts have been enabling colleges and universities to start and expand their own institutional programs for vocational discernment. NetVUE has also been convening its member institutions and grant recipients, resulting in three edited volumes on vocation in higher education.²⁶ An essay by NetVUE director David Cunningham in the second volume makes the important insight that it is not just individuals (or undergraduates on a developmental journey) who have vocations—institutions, such as colleges, can have vocations as well, and this has bearing on the collective vocation that undergraduates join in by attending there.²⁷

Cunningham’s insight connects to the third and most recent influential perspective: vocation as a communal endeavor. A major proponent of this perspective is

F. White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach* (2005); Katherine Turpin, *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (2006); Dori Grinenko Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer, *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on their Vocational Quests* (2007); and Fred Edie, *Book, Bath, Table, and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry* (2007).

²³ Kenda Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson, “Taste Tests and Teenagers: Vocational Discernment as a Creative Social Practice,” in Dean and Hearlson, *If We Let It*, 3–30 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016); quote from page 19.

²⁴ And even apart from youth and undergraduates, the Endowment’s efforts can be seen in a variety of institutional programs, such as the Communities of Calling Initiative at the Collegeville Institute, which provides grants and other resources to congregations for vocational discernment among church members of all ages. These efforts have also resulted in several books written or co-edited by Kathleen Cahalan and published by Eerdmans: *The Stories We Live: Finding God's Calling All around Us* (2017); with Douglas Schuurman, *Calling in Today's World: Voices from Eight Faith Perspectives* (2016); with Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life's Seasons* (2017).

²⁵ Works about these Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation include Tim Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) and Sarah B. Drummond, *Leading Change in Campus Religious Life: A Case Study on the Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation* (Riga, Latvia: Scholars’ Press, 2015).

²⁶ All three volumes are edited by David S. Cunningham and published by Oxford University Press: *Hearing Vocation Differently: Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy* (2019); *Vocation Across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education* (2017); *At This Time and in This Place: Vocation and Higher Education* (2015).

²⁷ David S. Cunningham, “Colleges Have Callings, Too: Vocational Reflection at the Institutional Level,” in Cunningham, *Vocation Across the Academy*, 249–71.

the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) and its leaders. Originally the Fund for Theological Education, FTE has been nurturing leaders for the church and academy since the 1950s, and a major component of its current programming is vocational discernment for young people who may be discerning a call to ministry (broadly defined). FTE's facilitators emphasize, however, that vocation does not belong to the young person or individual leader alone—instead, it arises out of community. This is the point that FTE president Stephen Lewis and his colleagues make in their book about FTE's processes and practices for vocational discernment, especially among communities of color.²⁸ Another FTE colleague, Patrick Reyes, offers a helpful image for institutions when thinking about doing vocational discernment in community: focus on creating constellations, not just individual stars.²⁹

OC has been using the language of vocation for some time, but the conversations connected to that language are much larger. Engaging these conversations directly also invites a reconsideration of what vocational discernment looks like at OC, especially in light of a new emphasis on community, while not neglecting the formation of individuals.

Where We're Going: Forming Students for Participation in God's Mission

The current discourse regarding ministry and vocation is expanding OC's ongoing understanding and work of preparing students for lives of Christian faith and service within each vocational discipline. In their book *Living At the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview*, Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew contend that a Christian worldview stems from a grand story that “is all embracing, with claims on every aspect of human life.”³⁰ In other words, the gospel does not just have implications over our spiritual lives but “needs to be made incarnate in every area of life,” most importantly in our work.³¹ In Western culture, life has been bifurcated into sacred and secular with religious vocations qualifying as sacred and informed by biblical narrative, and all other vocations as secular and informed by modern Western culture. In order to live in a reality formed by a Christian worldview, the gospel must be contextualized and embodied in non-religious vocations. Goheen and Bartholomew argue that envisioning all vocations within the purposes of God involves faithful contextualization. They contend that “faithful contextualization [of the gospel] demands discernment in three dimensions:

²⁸ Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams, and Dori Grinenko Baker, *Another Way: Living and Leading Change on Purpose* (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2020).

²⁹ Patrick B. Reyes, *The Purpose Gap: Empowering Communities of Color to Find Meaning and Thrive* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021). Reyes's own story reflects this emphasis on community; see Patrick B. Reyes, *Nobody Cries When We Die: God, Community, and Surviving to Adulthood* (Louisville: Chalice Press, 2016).

³⁰ Michael W. Goheen and Craig G Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 7.

³¹ Goheen and Bartholomew, 146.

(1) creational design, (2) cultural idolatry, and (3) healing potential.”³² These categories of discernment will help students (and faculty) know how “the gospel says both yes and no to each [vocation]: yes to the creational design or structure, no to the idolatrous religious power that has distorted that design.”³³ First, each vocational discipline must wrestle with the question: What is God’s creational purpose for a specific area of life in which a vocation participates? Second, faithful contextualization of the gospel involves gaining “insight into the cultural idolatry and the way that it corrupts God’s creation,” and God’s creational purposes for each vocational discipline.³⁴ Lastly, they argue that “a faithful witness will discern what healing action might look like in each particular situation.”³⁵ That is, answering the question: How does a specific vocation participate in God’s purposes for the world and the ways God intends to restore it?

In 2021, OC became a member of NetVUE and received a grant to conduct faculty listening sessions and workshops. These are designed for faculty who are already talking about how Christian faith shapes vocational disciplines and are intended to help establish a shared language and structure among departments for the integration of faith into every vocational discipline. Using Goheen and Bartholomew’s three discernment dimensions, OC faculty are asked to answer the following questions as a community within their specified discipline. The first question is “What did God create your specific vocational discipline for?” This question is to allow faculty within a particular discipline to recognize and acknowledge that the work they do and the vocations they train students for are from God and are intended to contribute to God’s good purposes for the world. The second question for faculty is “How has your vocational discipline been affected by the Fall or sin and death?” This question will require the faculty to collectively identify the challenges within the vocations that they are preparing students for and the ways that those vocations may not be contributing to God’s purposes for creation. The third question is “How can your vocational discipline participate in God’s purpose for the world in redemptive and healing ways?” This question is meant to help faculty rethink how they form students for the vocations they will enter in light of God’s purposes for the world.

These listening/workshop sessions are a first step in creating a communal process of discernment among faculty around vocation and for better clarifying how disciplines across campus participate in God’s purposes for the world. The goal is to establish a shared language and structure among departments for the integration of faith into every vocational discipline. The next step will be to integrate students into a similar process where they are discerning with faculty and fellow students how their vocations can participate in God’s mission and his intentions for creation. The intention is to honor and continue the tradition and culture that the Vocational Ministry second major has

³² Goheen and Bartholomew, 138.

³³ Goheen and Bartholomew, 138.

³⁴ Goheen and Bartholomew, 138.

³⁵ Goheen and Bartholomew, 139.

established at OC while expanding an understanding of vocation as participating in the purpose of God for the world.

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