

Vocation in Undergraduate Education Conference
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Before I note a few of the themes in the conversations here and over the last several years in our work together on the theological exploration of vocation, let me give you a glimpse of the University of the South, which is a good deal more often called Sewanee, the name of our small village on the Cumberland Plateau near the southwestern edge of the Appalachian mountains, not far from the point where Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama meet.

Sewanee is an institution of the Episcopal Church comprising a demanding liberal arts college and a graduate School of Theology. The University was founded in 1857 by Episcopal Bishops, priests, and laymen from across the South, and by the time in 1860 when many of those same Trustees gathered to lay a cornerstone in the mountain wilderness, an endowment over half the size of Harvard's at the time had been raised. But all was lost in the Civil War, and the University barely managed to limp back into existence after the War with the generosity of gifts secured through the Church of England. Sewanee has been marked at several times in its history by genteel poverty, and, even though in more recent years we have been blessed by a substantial endowment, the current economic adventures may oblige us to reclaim some of the strengths of those earlier years.

Sewanee's governance is rooted in its ownership by the Church. For example, we have a 150-member Board of Trustees, including more than 60 bishops and priests from the 28 Southern dioceses of the Church. Our All Saints' Chapel is a large Gothic-cathedral-like edifice that stands at the center of the campus both physically and symbolically, and its programs include much that is important and distinctive for Sewanee, including more than 20 worship services a week, a weekly Catechumenate program that draws large numbers of undergraduates, seminarians, faculty, staff, and students; and extensive outreach service programs that, for example, have groups today, early in our spring break, giving care and support to people in need in Quito (Ecuador), Canges (Haiti), New Orleans, Miami, and New York City.

About a third of our College students list themselves as Episcopalians, but Sewanee has long welcomed faculty, staff, and students from widely differing backgrounds. There have been Jewish faculty from very early on, and there are now Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, agnostics, and even a good many Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians.

It has been said that we think we are at Oxford. The architecture, the governance, and the black academic gowns faculty and honor students wear to class as a mark of reverence for learning all make us a bit nonstandard, and being lodged on a 13,000-acre preserve of mountain forest, trails, streams, and caves gives us unusual resources to fulfill our commitments to reflection and to environmental study and sustainable living.

With that in mind, let me tell you a few of the themes that have resonated for me in work with many of you in the theological exploration of vocation both in this conference and over the last several years:

1. We are all too busy. Our BlackBerries overfloweth. The urgent shallow drives out the deep that requires more time to understand. The disciplines of reading, listening, talking, and reflection that come as a part of our efforts in theological exploration of vocation give antidotes to the poison of too much to think about. And this is true of our students and our colleagues as much as it is for us. We need to vow to find more time for contemplation and caring conversation and find ways to encourage our students and colleagues to do the same.
2. We need to give more attention to giving encouragement and permission to others. This conference, like almost all the times we are with others, has put us in touch with some who inspire us and others who are wrestling with uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. Several of you here have shared concerns about possible next jobs, family crises, and, almost universally, the personal and institutional effects of the economic downturn. Happily our reflections on the literature of vocation provide a way to see these challenges in our lives in a larger context and provide insights that can protect us from confusion and despair.
3. The rich array of means we have developed in the theological exploration of vocation help to break down the isolation into disciplines and professional fields that we otherwise tend to settle into.
4. We have been given tools for thinking about the tension that exists for all of us between our personal ambitions and the common good. I gave a talk recently in which I cited and praised a book published last year by political scientist Hugh Heclo, On Thinking Institutionally. I commend it to you as well as a resource in our work together on vocation in undergraduate education. When I shared my notes from that talk with Professor Heclo, he was gracious in thanking me for them, but he did offer one quibble. I had credited him with the view that we need more often to sacrifice our personal interests to serve the common good. Here's what he said in response: "Of course in some immediate sense that might seem true. But really, without getting into the deeper and more important things of religion, I am asking a person to think about what is good for his or her soul. That is what I was struggling to say in writing, 'And while the public culture might not notice or reward these larger loyalties, they are the kinds of things we are likely to cherish when, from some terminus, we look back on the course our life has taken.'"

Added in response to questions:

A. On the need and importance of community in the theological exploration of vocation: Sewanee's Summer Discernment Institute, which has drawn undergraduate participants from many other colleges and universities for a program comprising a first week of intense study in intense community; six-week internships in churches, orphanages, and other service organizations across the country and around the world; and a final week of intense reflection in community, gives strong evidence of the power that sharing deep feelings and aspirations with others can have in the exploration of vocation.

B. On the insights offered by William May on *Gabe* (gift) and *Aufgabe* (task): We need to remember that not all gifts seem all that gift-like. Lilly Endowment Program Officer Chris Coble shared with a group of us in one of the breakout sessions yesterday the counsel the chief executive of the national health facilities corporation Wellpoint gave a group of pastors recently. He said, "Don't waste the recession," by which he meant that we need to accept the ungift-like gift of the current economic crisis to carry out the challenging task of focusing on our institutions' core missions and cutting back the parts that are not essential to those missions. *Gabe* and *Aufgabe* together.