Chapter 17 That Wonderful and Sacred Mystery The Church

perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen*.

—The Book of Common Prayer, p. 280

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their

Bob prayed at the church where I worked as a musician. Every week, after the service, Bob would stay in the church, alone with Jesus to pray. He had been doing this for years. Each week, we would chat: He would usually tell me a corny joke, and we would make small talk. But we also talked about prayer. He gave me my first rosary because he wanted me to know the gifts of God's presence that he enjoyed. I learned that he was going to retire

from his factory job after decades of work. The next week, I began our conversation, "Bob! What did you do on your first day as a retired person, with loads of free time?" Without missing a beat, he said, "I went to a 7:30 a.m. Mass to give thanks to God for over forty years of work and good health. What else would I do?"

I've thought about Bob and our conversation many times over the years. Bob saw the church as central to his life of prayer—and to his whole life. It was second nature for him. I wonder how many years it took him to reach this point. Or maybe he was born with this charism—this holy gift. Either way, his life is a model for us all: The church should be central to our lives. When we have thanks to offer or pleas to cry out, we would do well to come to church.

It is tempting to think of church as a place to find ease, a place to be affirmed and comforted. But while these things may happen occasionally, that's not really what church is about. In simplest terms, church is the gathering of Jesus' followers. Speaking most broadly, people all over the world who claim to follow Jesus are gathered into one worldwide church. Locally, when we talk about "our church," we really mean the community of people with whom we gather to follow Jesus.

The church isn't an ordinary community. The scriptures promise that God abides in the church, in all its glory and ordinary life and problems. The church has great variety, because a great variety of people are its members. Saint Paul says it best:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member,

where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Corinthians 12:12-26)

Differences that we might imagine (race, gender, political persuasion, sexual orientation, economic status) fall to the wayside in baptism, as we are grafted into Christ's body, the church. And yet that sacred body, the church, takes into itself each one of us in our diversity. We do not hide or deny who we were made to be as we join the church, but rather, we flourish as the people God has made us, and the church shines radiantly when its members gather in their unity and diversity. Another aspect of this body metaphor is that we understand that the church needs each of us in our diversity. We need people with many gifts and passions, and we each do our part to make the body healthy. Just as Saint Paul talks about a body needing its members, so too does the church need its many members. To have a church, for example, we need pastors, prophets, and teachers.

The body metaphor is one way to understand the church, but there are others. We also articulate our beliefs about the church in our creeds. For instance, in the Nicene Creed, we say that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The answers are crisp and incisive in the Catechism (854):

"Q. Why is the Church described as one?

"A. The Church is one, because it is one Body, under one Head, our Lord Jesus Christ."

With so many denominations in the world, the idea of the church as one unified body can be hard to understand. But even though denominations have many differences, the vast majority of Christians recognize each other's baptisms and acknowledge other Christians as part of a universal church.

"Q. Why is the Church described as holy?

"A. The Church is holy, because the Holy Spirit dwells in it, consecrates its members, and guides them to do God's work."

When we say the church is holy, we do not say that the church is perfect. Far from it! Because the church is filled with humans, it will always be filled with human error. Still, we believe that God's presence abides in the church and that God's will is carried out through the church.

"Q. Why is the Church described as catholic?

"A. The Church is catholic, because it proclaims the whole Faith to all people, to the end of time." Catholic means roughly the same thing as universal, so the catholic church is the universal church throughout the world. When people say "Roman Catholic," they are talking about a particular denomination, headquartered in Rome. But many other Christians use the term catholic to describe a church that is universal. We understand ourselves to be part of that universal church and bound by the theology and practice of that wider church.

"Q. Why is the Church described as apostolic?

"A. The Church is apostolic, because it continues in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles and is sent to carry out Christ's mission to all people."

To say that the church is apostolic means that it continues in the tradition of the apostles, that its faith and practices are rooted in those that Jesus' own followers taught and practiced. The word apostle comes from Greek, and it literally means one who is sent out. Thus to speak of an apostolic church is also to speak of a church that is continually reaching out into the world to proclaim good news of Christ and share God's love.

The Mission of the Church

In addition to explaining the definition of the church, the Catechism also articulates the church's mission: "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in

Christ" (855). At first glance, this might sound a bit like the church's job is to be nice, because unity is nice. However, a quick scratch of the surface reveals a much more complex and challenging reality with our mission in the church.

For one thing, to be restored to unity, we must be reconciled. To be reconciled, we have to know who we are and why we are not already restored to unity. In reconciliation, as in recovery, the first step is admitting we have a problem. In order to be reconciled to one another and to restore the unity that God intends for us, we must first acknowledge the ways that we have fallen short of being the people that God has called us to be. Think about it like a friendship that is estranged. I cannot restore a broken friendship if I cannot see how the friendship was damaged and what role I played in the break.

Moreover, unless I am willing to change my actions to prevent the same break again, the friendship is not restored through a simple apology. In other words, if I want to be restored to unity with God and with others, I have to be serious about it. There is nothing easy about this restoration. I need the church's help and the Spirit's guidance if I'm going to acknowledge who I am and what I've done and then live a new life in Christ.

Another phrase is also critical in our mission as the church: "All people." If the church's job is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ, we need to do some evangelism, to tell people about the Good News of God in Christ and invite them to be grafted into Christ's body, the church. If we remain inside our church buildings, we cannot carry out our worldwide, universal

mission of healing, wholeness, and restoration.

Anglican View of the Church

Christian agreement is far more widespread than disagreement. And so it is with the church. We Anglicans agree with most Christians that the church is ancient, universal, holy, and so forth. Still, there are some unique or special charisms to Anglican understandings of the church.

We look at Canterbury, England, as our spiritual motherland. Let us take a step back and look at our history. When the king of England fought with the pope over a number of issues in the sixteenth century, the church in England became independent of Rome. This was the result of a long-simmering division, one in which the English and Celtic churches had been at odds with others. Events such as the king's need for a divorce (and the pope's refusal to grant one) coupled with the foment of the Lutheran and Calvinist reformations ultimately caused King Henry VIII to sever ties with Rome. When those first independent Anglican Christians were articulating and justifying their faith, they understandably emphasized how the church is shaped by ancient, universal tradition as well as local practice and custom.

As English colonists spread around the world, so too did the Church of England and English culture and traditions. At the same time, Anglicans valued local culture as well. What this means today is that the liturgy is similar throughout the worldwide

family of Anglican churches but also reflects local traditions integrated into the church's practice and worship. To be sure, the church has been corrupted with the sin of colonialism in much of its history, but when the church has been at its best, Anglicans have honored local tradition and universal faith.

So where does this leave us today? The Archbishop of Canterbury is viewed by Anglican bishops all over the world as the first among equals. While the Archbishop of Canterbury does not have authority like the Pope in the Roman Catholic church, the archbishop does have a persuasive spiritual authority by virtue of the office.

Our own Episcopal Church offers a liturgy that would feel familiar to Anglicans from nearly every part of the globe. There are certainly differences, but they are much smaller than our similarities. However, our heritage and our story have shaped our understanding of the church in important ways.

Why Go to Church?

Several years ago, I was asked to give a series of talks on why we should go to church. Fantastic! And then I started thinking. Beyond my own personal preferences, what *are* the best reasons to go to church? So I asked, on Facebook, if people could find scriptural warrant for Christians to gather in churches.

Some people cited Jesus' promise in Matthew, "For

where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (18:20). While this passage affirms Christ's presence with his gathered followers, it is more about conflict resolution than corporate worship.

Others mentioned Pentecost, specifically the story about what life was like for the early Christians after they received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And

day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

Certainly, this passage offers a compelling witness to the power of God at work in the Christian community, but it might be hard for modern Christians to connect to this dazzling, centuries-old experience.

I looked through Saint Paul's letters to find an answer to the question: Why church? Paul assumes that followers of Jesus will be gathered in churches. And he acknowledges that it won't always be easy. Churches will be filled with conflict, because they are filled with flawed humans. Each conflict is not a failure but rather an opportunity to practice the reconciling love of Christ with one another.

While Paul's letters offer wonderful advice to churches, the Letter to the Hebrews takes the different approach. Hebrews offers this exhortation,

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (10:23-25)

We must not neglect to gather. There can be no solitary Christians. And why do we gather? To *provoke* one another to love and good deeds.

When I gave my series of talks on why we should go to church, I got some pushback on the word "provoke." It seems so...not very...nice. Yet even the original Greek has much the same meaning. Our task as Christians is to provoke one another—not to always be nice to one another. While it seems counterintuitive, this notion of the provocative church makes sense. We expect our close friends to tell us the truth, even when we're not sure we want to hear it. It follows then that we who are beloved in Christ are meant to be close to one another, to speak words of love and truth to one another at all times.

Sometimes our task is to be provocative. "You really need to reach out to your sibling and apologize for what you've done."

"You say you don't have time to pray, but don't you

really mean that you don't *make* time to pray?" If we are "nice" to one another, we will never risk conflict or say something that might be received with difficulty, but that's not the Christian way. Jesus wasn't nice; he spoke the truth. That is our role as the church too.

When we gather as Christians, our task is to provoke one another to be better followers of Jesus, to be more Christ-like. The words of our liturgy provoke us. Good preaching and good teaching will do that too. And so too must we provoke one another. This is the fundamental point of gathering.

To put it more positively, we must inspire one another. Even Hebrews talks about encouraging one another. When I am feeling discouraged about my journey with Jesus, someone at the church may help me find hope again. Or maybe I will be the beacon for another. We can only encourage one another when we are in community.

What are the implications of these various understandings of church? The church is not like other secular, voluntary organizations. It has a sacred charter and is part of God's saving work for

all people. The church is not one activity choice among many, something to do when it makes us feel good or is convenient. Rather, the church is the central way we encounter God and God's people, and its purpose is to encourage and provoke us to be more Christ-like. The church is a great gift to us and the world, and it is our task to share that gift with those around us.

For Reflection

- In the Catechism on page 854 of The Book of Common Prayer, the church is described as "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" Which of those three characteristics is most important to you and why?
- Why do you go to church?
- Did this chapter encourage you to think about going to church in a different way? How so or

why not?

- * How is the church different from other voluntary social organizations?
- * Have you ever been to a church that is very different from your home church, either a different denomination or an Anglican church in another part of the world? What was similar and what was different?



Chapter 18 Defend Your Church Structure and Governance

Let your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

—The Book of Common Prayer, p. 232

The structure and governance of the Episcopal Church balances two opposites in a beautiful dialogue. On the one hand, our church is hierarchical. The word episcopal means having to do with bishops, and so we have bishops with great authority in some areas. There are plenty of churches in the world whose governance is purely hierarchical. But ours also has another side. Our church is democratic. At every level, we insist that lay people and other clergy—not just bishops—be involved in decision making. There are lots of churches that are governed purely by local and regional meetings. What makes Anglican Christianity different from many other traditions is that we balance hierarchy and democracy.

In the last chapter, we talked about the church the whole, global church—and why it is good for Christians to be part of a church community. We talked about big ideas. The church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. In this chapter, we'll talk about how the Episcopal Church is structured and governed. The fancy, churchy word for this topic is polity. Polity comes from a Greek word that means form of government. Don't worry—this is way more interesting than it sounds!

Our insistence that lay people are included in the governance of our church at every level reflects our view that God has blessed people with the gifts of reason and skill and that it is important to give voice to those gifts. We value democracy and transparency, and we want our church to reflect truth in our own internal workings so that we can manifest it to the world with credibility.

The Episcopal Church is governed by a constitution and a set of rules called canons. Canons are, in essence, regulations the church adopts to govern itself. To change the constitution or canons of the Episcopal Church, the bishops and deputies at the church-wide, triennial General Convention must vote together to approve new text. If you are curious about the canons, you can download a copy at www.episcopalchurch.org.

Those who are called into positions of leadership—lay leaders, bishops, priests, and sometimes deacons—are given authority and power over other people to discharge their duties within the limits of church regulation. Our church's rules describe how particular temporal things (church buildings,

money, corporations) are to be under the authority of elected groups or, sometimes, individual clergy. When authority is given, it is never unlimited or unquestioned authority but is carefully spelled out in our canons. It is also notable that ordained people promise that they will obey those in authority over them. This is another example of how our church bears marks of a hierarchical church but with transparency and accountability at all levels. Together, hierarchy and democratic governance function as a kind of check and balance system for each other.

We will now look at polity at three levels: congregation, diocese, and church-wide. Like most of the rest of this book, we're simplifying complicated subjects here, so please check out some of the additional resources listed in the appendix.

Congregations

Congregations are usually led by a priest and a group of elected lay leaders. These lay leaders function both as the board of directors of the church as a nonprofit institution and as spiritual leaders who, with the clergy leader, lead the vision for the mission of the church. Typically, the leaders are organized into what is called a vestry. However, if the church is under the supervision of a bishop, they may be called a bishop's committee or mission council.

The clergy person who leads the church serves as the chair of the group of lay leaders and may vote on matters that require a vote. However, the lay leaders are able to vote their conscience. This contrasts with some denominations in which the clergy have sole control over financial and other matters. Generally these vestry and leadership meetings are open, so if you are curious what's going on in your church, find out when the leaders meet and attend the gathering. The group will review financial reports, discuss important matters that concern the church's material or spiritual well-being, and often share time together in Bible study or Christian formation.

Nearly all congregations have an annual meeting, to which all voting members are invited. Most churches permit all communicants in good standing to vote, and this is defined in the Episcopal Church canons as those "who for the previous year have been faithful in corporate worship, unless for good cause prevented, and have been faithful

in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God" (Canon I.17.3). This means that membership in the church is different from a voluntary society: Members are expected, as a normal practice, to work, pray, and give to support God's work. And the standard for worship attendance is pretty high, suggesting that one should be in church every week, "unless for good cause prevented." Details on these definitions will vary, but the point here is that on the one hand, the church is quite open, saying that lots of people have voting interest in the congregation's affairs. On the other hand, there is a standard of discipleship at work; one cannot simply pay dues and be considered a member in good standing.

The priest who leads a church is often called a rector. Rectors have tenure, like a professor. When a church needs a new rector, the vestry usually delegates a search committee with the task of recruiting and identifying suitable candidates; one or more candidates are presented to the vestry, and the vestry elects the person who they believe is called by God to be their next rector. This decision is then ratified by a bishop.

In some cases, the priest who leads the congregation is called a vicar, which means that the congregation is under the care of a bishop who has delegated leadership to a vicar, appointed by the bishop. Vicars generally serve at the pleasure of the bishop. A priest-in-charge is generally given a time-limited agreement,

perhaps for a year or two or three, to lead the congregation. Priests-in-charge are sent by the bishop, but the vestry has the right to approve or reject the choice. All of this may vary widely based on diocesan regulation, state law, or local custom.

At the annual meeting, voting members usually elect members to the vestry or bishop's committee and representatives to diocesan gatherings, approve financial reports and perhaps budgets, and review ministries and events of the church's life.

Episcopal congregations have a good deal of autonomy in some ways. Each congregation makes its own financial decisions and governs many of its affairs. But the Episcopal Church is not a congregational church, meaning that our primary organizational unit is not the local church. Instead, we are fundamentally organized by diocese. Each congregation contributes some of its budget to support ministry in the diocese, such as campus ministries, camps and conference centers, urban ministries, diocesan program staff, and the work of the bishop. Congregations have some autonomy, but the bishop also exercises authority over the church, and many aspects of life together—especially worship—are governed by *The Book of Common Prayer*, as we saw in earlier chapters.

Dioceses

When I was a parish priest, people new to the Episcopal Church would sometimes ask about our diocese. What is it? What is its function? I would provide all the textbook answers, but I would usually suggest that if they really want to learn about the diocese, they should attend the annual diocesan convention. There, you see clergy and lay leaders from every corner of the diocese gathered for worship, fellowship, and legislative deliberation. All of this is led by the bishop, and this is the closest we can get to seeing what an abstract idea ("the diocese") looks like in real life.

Each diocese is led by a bishop, who serves until retirement or resignation. When there is a vacancy for bishop, the diocese receives nominations and a committee forms a slate of nominees. The diocesan convention, consisting of elected lay members and clergy, elects its next bishop from the slate. An important principle of this process is that lay people and clergy together elect their bishop.

From the earliest times, the church was organized around bishops. At first, each city would have its own bishop, and that bishop would be assisted in worship by many deacons or presbyters. Thus the bishop was at the center of the sacramental and liturgical life of the diocese. Baptisms, confirmations, and ordinations, among other sacraments, were to be performed by the bishop. When the bishop could not be present, worship was delegated to presbyters to act on the bishop's behalf. Clergy were meant to have a pastoral relationship with their bishop. So our pattern in the beginning was that practically and sacramentally, diocesan life flowed out from the bishop.

Today we have added layers of complexity, and our dioceses are too geographically large for bishops to be as embedded in the practical and sacramental life of the diocese as they once were. Still, it continues to be true that presbyters are acting in the bishop's stead and that all sacramental life in a diocese flows from the bishop.

Our bishops are advised by a group of lay leaders and clergy called a Standing Committee. These people advise the bishop on leadership of the diocese and must consent to certain actions, such as clergy discipline or selling property.

Bishops govern with the consent of clergy and lay people. And bishops safeguard the doctrine of our church, and could, for example, remove a priest who preached false teaching. But bishops are not dictators, and the rights and prerogatives of congregations and clergy are protected, especially by our tradition of transparency and democracy. A bishop is not a pope; bishops cannot force lay people to believe or say certain things in order to be eligible for sacraments.

Of course, the diocese is more than just a bishop and Standing Committee. Most dioceses also have a group of elected and appointed leaders called a council or board as well as other committees of lay leaders and clergy that typically oversee the programmatic life of a diocese. And then, there is the annual diocesan convention, in which clergy and elected lay leaders come together for worship, for formation, and to make decisions.

Church-wide

The Episcopal Church is led by a presiding bishop, whose title also includes descriptive add-ons, chief pastor and primate. Chief pastor refers to the Presiding Bishop's work as the pastor to all other bishops and to the whole church, especially as it involves speaking to and on behalf of the church on social or moral issues. Primate is a funny word that means "senior-most bishop" in a country or church. The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church leads a staff of people, many of whom work in the headquarters office in New York City. This group provides program resources for the whole church, as well as administers the resources of the church.

The General Convention of the Episcopal Church meets once every three years, and it is the chief authority within our church. This triennial gathering is part legislative assembly, part revival, part marketplace, and part family reunion. Though our church is large, as leaders gather regularly, old friendships are renewed and new friendships are forged. Meanwhile, over in the exhibit hall, vendors from advocacy groups, sellers of church goods, bookshops, schools, and church organizations sell their wares and tell their stories. Every day, thousands of people gather to raise their voices in song and praise, as General Convention attendees celebrate massive worship services together.

General Convention is a public gathering. Anyone can come and wander through the exhibit hall

or attend daily worship. The center of General Convention is the legislative process, and each item goes through a hearing process. Anyone can come and listen to testimony or sign up to speak about the issue being discussed. The legislative gatherings are open to guests. You might have to register onsite, but you are most welcome to come and see what the Episcopal Church looks like in all its global diversity—glory and warts.

In recent years, much of the convention has been live streamed on the web for people who want to follow along but who cannot attend in person. Learn more about recent and upcoming General Conventions at www.generalconvention.org.

Officially, General Convention is a bicameral legislative body, consisting of a House of Bishops

and a House of Deputies. The presiding bishop is the head of the House of Bishops, and the House of Deputies is led by a president, who may be a lay person, a priest, or a deacon. During the convention, legislation must be agreed upon by both houses for ratification. There are eight deputies—four lay people and four priests or deacons—from each diocese. With just over 100 dioceses, the legislative body is quite large, with 800-plus deputies. With few exceptions, every bishop is eligible to take part in the House of Bishops, so there are usually around 200 bishops. The General Convention votes on matters of liturgy and worship, social policy, budgeting, and church governance.

Free and open debate is a hallmark of the General Convention, and anyone can attend the convention and watch the houses debate matters or even speak at legislative hearings.

When the convention is not in session, the church is governed by an Executive Council consisting of about forty elected and *ex officio* members, including lay people, bishops, priests, and deacons. The Executive Council, which also functions as the board of directors of the corporate body for the Episcopal Church, meets several times each year.

As you can see, at every level of the Episcopal Church, democratic participation and transparency are core values, along with participation by lay people, bishops, priests, and deacons. And yet the same structures call and empower leaders who exercise authority specific to their context and role.

While most of us will spend the majority of our time in local congregations, it is worth noting the vast church that lies beyond our community. This wider church connects us to other Christians in our own state or region and to Anglicans around the world.

In all that we say about our church, we do not claim perfection but rather seek to admit and correct error when we find it. One of our prayers covers this very subject.

Gracious Father, we pray for thy holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ thy Son our Savior. Amen. (816)

Just as Anglicans see the human life as a pilgrimage of sanctification, in which we are constantly growing into the full stature of Christ, we see the church as an imperfect institution that is always growing toward being a perfect icon of God's kingdom on earth.

For Reflection

- In our church governance, we balance two opposing values: hierarchy and democracy. What are some of the gifts of this balance? What are some of the challenges?
- * As a lay person, you can take your place in the governance of the church at a local, diocesan, and church-wide level. How is this important to you? In what ways can you imagine living into this calling?
- What might our church be like without lay

involvement?

- * How have you, at your church, experienced the ministry of your bishop?
- As an Episcopalian, you are a member of three levels of polity: your congregation, your diocese, and the larger Episcopal Church. What are some ways that you could make connections on each of these levels? How might each level impact your faith?



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Chapter 19 o this site A Great Cloud of Witnesses

The Communion of Saints

Almighty God, you have surrounded us with a great cloud of witnesses: Grant that we, encouraged by the good example of your servants, may persevere in running the race that is set before us, until at last we may with them attain to your eternal joy; through Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen*.

Being a Christian is a powerful thing, in part because it means we are never alone. God is with us always: God who became incarnate for the explicit purpose of being fully with us as Emmanuel, and God the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and empowers us to do God's work in the world. We also have, as we explored in Chapter 17, the presence of the church, a community of believers surrounding us who challenge and support us through all the times and seasons of our lives. Further, as Christians, we are a part of the communion of saints, a great cloud of witnesses who have lived lives that proclaim the Jesus that they know and love.

There is often confusion about what it means to be a saint. Saint comes from the Greek word αγιος (hagios), derived from the verb αγιάζω (hagiazo). These words literally mean to set apart, to sanctify, or to make holy. Thus saints are those who are set apart, sanctified, or being made holy.

On November 1, or the Sunday after, the church celebrates All Saints' Day as a principal feast. This is a day to celebrate all the heroes of the faith, the saints we have remembered across time and culture. Think of all the saints: Saint Paul, Saint Mary, Saint John, and so forth, and that's who we celebrate on All Saints' Day. Then the next day, we commemorate what is often called All Souls Day, though its formal name is the Commemoration of All Faithful Departed. On this day, we remember

all the Christians dear to us who have gone on to their glory. So on November 1, we celebrate Saint Andrew and Saint Martha, but on November 2, we remember Uncle Andy and Granny Martha. To help differentiate, this chapter uses Saints with a capital S to refer to those the church honors on All Saints' Day.

In a very real sense, this means baptized Christians are saints. Followers of Jesus Christ are set apart from the world. We believe that we are sanctified by God, and we are made holy by the power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ. In the Bible, the word saints often refers to believers; Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:7). And to the Corinthians, Paul

writes: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours..." (Corinthians 1:2). In both these passages, saints means all the believers in Jesus. And yet, the church through the ages has recognized certain people as Saints (with a capital S). One of the earliest actions of the church was to remember specific saints and martyrs; the first generations of Christians gathered to pray and give thanks for those who proclaimed their faith, even in the face of death. Early Christians saw those Saints both as examples to emulate and as companions in life. The early martyrs and other examples of extraordinary faithfulness continue to be remembered through the ages, and over the years, more Saints have been added to their number.

The Episcopal Church follows this ancient tradition of recalling and remembering the Saints. The men and women whom the church officially recognizes as Saints are found in The Calendar of the Church year, on pages 19-30 of The Book of Common Prayer. The church does not *make* Saints; the church merely recognizes people whom God has made Saints. The Saints listed in *The Book of Common Prayer* are those that the Episcopal Church has, as a body, agreed to recognize and honor. The list of Saints is full of rich variety: young and old, lay and ordained, recent and ancient, from every race and ethnicity and nationality. The supplemental book, Lesser Feasts and Fasts, contains a biography and collect for each Saint, as well as readings from the Bible related to the Saint. These collects and readings can be used in personal prayer or at public services of worship in a church. By learning about these Saints, observing their feast days, and praying with and for them, we can be inspired and encouraged in our own lives of faith.

A feast day is the day designated to observe a certain saint; it is called a feast because it is a day of great celebration! Most saints are observed, not on their birthdays, but instead on the date of their death. So, for example, the Episcopal Church recognizes Martin Luther King Jr. not on the federal holiday in January (near his birthday) but instead on April 4, the date of his death. This is a reminder that we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. not as a civic leader, but as a Saint whose life and words fearlessly proclaimed the witness of Jesus Christ. We observe Saints on the date of their death as a reminder that, for Christians, death is not an end but a new beginning of eternal life with God.

As of this writing, the Episcopal Church's official sanctoral calendar (the list of the saints recognized by the Episcopal Church) is found in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006. The Book of Common Prayer* includes this list in The Calendar of the Church Year. Changes or additions to the sanctoral calendar are made by the General Convention, because it is important that the wider church agrees upon the person's extraordinary example of Christian faithfulness.

The General Convention most recently approved a new set of saints for our church to remember in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2018*. While the 2006 set remain official, the 2018 commemorations are for "trial use," so after we experiment with

this collection, it could be made permanent by a future General Convention.

The Book of Common Prayer also gives guidelines for individual communities to observe other saints who are important to their context, using the Common of Saints, found on pages 246-250. So, for example, your community could observe a deacon who offered extraordinary service or a lay person from your community whose life and witness proclaimed Jesus Christ to those around her. By using the prayers and carefully selecting readings from the options in Lesser Feasts and Fasts, local saints can be raised up and observed wherever they are found.

The list of Saints in the Episcopal Church is rich

and varied, full of extraordinary and sometimes surprising people. In addition to modern saints like Martin Luther King Jr., our calendar includes ancient examples of faithfulness like Perpetua and her Companions: a group of young women who are among some of the earliest martyrs in the Church. Although Perpetua was wealthy and the mother of a newborn child, she was unwilling to deny her faith in order to save her life. In the face of questioning she proclaimed: "I am a Christian" and was sentenced to death along with her companions. Our sanctoral (Saint) calendar includes authors like C.S. Lewis, who wrote meaty theology and imaginative fantasy to bring both young and old into deeper relationship with God in Christ. There are monastics (monks and nuns) like Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Teresa of Avila, who lived out their faith in lives deeply committed both to prayer

and the service of the poor. And there are musicians like J.S. Bach, who wrote music to the glory of God and used that music to draw others more deeply into the praise and worship of God.

If you want to learn more about the stories of some of the saints in The Episcopal Church, check out *Celebrating the Saints*, a one-year curriculum from Forward Movement, or explore Lent Madness (www.lentmadness.org), an annual Lenten devotional on the lives of the saints.

As we look through the list of Saints observed by the Episcopal Church, we find an incredibly important and oft-overlooked resource in our life of faith. The lives, writings, actions, and experiences of the Saints reveal to us what is possible through God's

indwelling Spirit. Their witness shows us how the story of Jesus doesn't end with the empty tomb or even with the generation of apostles and disciples who immediately followed Jesus. The lives of the Saints continue the Christian story, stretching from the time of Jesus and to this very day.

But Saints are not simply figures embedded in the past that we read about in history books; they are meant as companions who, through time and space, journey with us and spur us on to love and good deeds. Whenever we say the Apostles' Creed, we affirm the communion of Saints. Communion means "together with," testifying to the mystery that the Saints are present with us, even now, reminding us that we are not alone and showing us that the difficulties and questions that we encounter are not new but have been wrestled with

and struggled over by many who have gone before us.

And that's an important thing to remember about Saints: Saints are not immune to questioning or struggle. Saints are not perfect people; they have foibles and flaws just like the rest of us. In fact, among the saints you'll find Peter, who denied Jesus not once, but three times. Saint Augustine was infamous for living a profligate life in his early years. Almost all of the Saints encounter moments of deep doubt; many of them also struggled with pride, anger, or prejudice.

Saints struggle and sin, just as we do. Yet they allow God's light to shine through their imperfect selves. They allow even their imperfections to be used to serve God in the world, to glorify God. Saints are not people who are already fully holy, but people who have submitted themselves to be *made holy* by God. Their imperfections remind us that we too can serve God in amazing and radical ways, as imperfect as we are.

Saints are also not superheroes; they don't have any extra, special powers. They weren't bitten by radioactive spiders, and they don't come from an alien planet. The amazing things they do aren't because of any magical power they have themselves but because of God's power working through them, God's life living in them. Their humanity reminds us that we don't need superpowers in order to witness to God's power and promise; we can do that as fully human as we are.

And yet, a Saint is not just a "good person." Our culture gives us lots of lists of great human beings and influential people. Saints are not another of those lists. Saints are special, not because of the good that they did but because of the way that they proclaimed, not only with their lips but also in their lives, the God who is made known in Jesus Christ. They are notable, not for themselves, but for the power of God working in them. Saints are people whose good deeds or extraordinary actions point, clearly and powerfully, to Jesus. In other words, Saints are not known for being status keepers or revolutionaries (though some were); they are not revered because of a special skill or excellence in a certain realm of experience. Saints are known for being excellent disciples—students and followers of Jesus.

As witnesses to Jesus, the Saints have a great deal to teach us, both about the historic faith and about the way that faith impacts our daily lives. When we study the lives of the Saints, when we read their writings, and when we pray with and for them by observing the feasts of Saints included in the calendar of the church year, they teach us. They teach us theology as they encounter ideas about God and discover what is within the bounds of what we call Christianity and what lies beyond. They teach us church history, as they show us what it looks like to live out the Christian life and faith in different ages and places. They teach us spiritual disciplines, as they struggle with how to encounter God in their daily lives and how to live faithfully in and among the culture. They teach us how to live, and perhaps just as important, how to die, as they face trials and dangers without fear, neither

denying nor defying death, but trusting in the One who created them and loves them always.

One of the collects "Of a Saint" in *The Book of Common Prayer* speaks to the mystical union we have with all the saints:

Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit you have made us one with your saints in heaven and on earth: Grant that in our earthly pilgrimage we may always be supported by this fellowship of love and prayer, and know ourselves to be surrounded by their witness to your power and mercy. We ask this for the sake of Jesus Christ, in whom all our intercessions are acceptable through the Spirit, and who lives and reigns for ever and ever. *Amen.* (250)

Episcopalians do not pray to the Saints in place of praying to God or Jesus, as though we need a Saint to talk to God in our place. Instead, we pray *in companionship with the Saints*. We might ask the Saints (or a specific Saint) to pray for or with us, just as we would ask a friend to pray for or with us. In this way, the Saints join us as part of our community of faith, supporting us with their prayers.

Here we are reminded that we are one with all the Saints, deeply connected to them as part of the Body of Christ. This is a unity that transcends the differences of space and time; although they have died, the Saints both support and surround us as we walk through the journey of our lives. The idea that we are surrounded by Saints who have died can sound kind of strange, or even scary, not unlike a famous quote from the movie *The Sixth Sense:* "I see dead people." Yet, the communion of Saints is not meant to be scary but sacred (and hopefully comforting). As Christians, we believe that baptism is forever, indelible, and ties us to God and to one another in a way that defies time and space. Just as we are tied to our earthly family through blood and birth, so we are tied to our Christian family through baptism and new birth. As the Catechism tells us:

"Q. What is the communion of saints?

A. The communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise (862)."

The communion of Saints is the whole family of God, our family. And our lives as faithful people are richer because of their presence and witness. The Saints remind us:

- We are not alone. We have companions in our journey of faith to comfort, support, and challenge us. We have people who are on our side in the struggle to follow Jesus.
- We are surrounded and upheld by prayer. In our eucharistic prayer each week, we join our prayers together with the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints. The great cloud of witnesses prays with

and for us, not only on Sundays but throughout our lives.

* Our faith is not in vain. When we struggle and wonder if there's hope for our world or a possibility for us to do the right thing, others

who have gone before us inspire and show us how to follow Jesus in our own time. The Saints through the ages have brought light into some of the darkest places and periods of history. They remind us that we, too, are the light of the world, and our faith can and does make a difference.

For Reflection

- Is there a Saint who has been important to you in your life of faith? Who was that person, and why are they important?
- * Have you ever asked a Saint to pray for you? Why or why not?
- Saints are typically celebrated on the dates of their death rather than their birthdays. What might this say to us about the life of faith and

about how we approach death?

The Saints include people who have committed nearly every sin, and yet God has worked through them to be bearers of Christ's love in the world. Do you find it empowering or discouraging to think about Saints as flawed



Chapter 20 The Work You Give Us to Do Vocation

Almighty God our heavenly Father, you declare your glory and show forth your handiwork in the heavens and in the earth: Deliver us in our various occupations from the service of self alone, that we may do the work you give us to do in truth and beauty and for the common good: for the sake of him who came among us as one who serves, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the

Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

—The Book of Common Prayer, p. 261

Vocation is not a word we hear much in our world. We are much more interested in occupation. We ask children: "What do you want to do when you grow up?" We ask teens headed off to college: "What do you want to study?" We ask young adults nearing college graduation: "What do you want to do with your degree?" And once individuals join a profession, we stop asking about their dreams and aspirations; we assume they have found what they want to do and are simply doing it.

We are preoccupied with occupation, and we fail to ask people of all ages: "Who are you? Who do you

hope to be? Who is God calling you to be?" These are questions, not of occupation, but of vocation.

The word vocation comes from the Latin word vocare, which means to call, and is also related to the word for voice. This etymology gives us insight into what we mean by vocation: It is your calling—who God calls you to be and what God calls you to do. And vocation is your life's way of speaking; it is your individual voice that only you can offer to the world.

Growing up in the South, I often heard people talk about when someone "got the call," as in "He was working in his daddy's law firm until he got the call and went to seminary to be a pastor." This presumed that vocation was reserved for ministers, those who work in the church. And we often still

use the word in that way. But our Catechism calls us to think much more broadly about vocation. In the Episcopal Church, all Christians are ministers! In fact, *The Book of Common Prayer* features a beautiful collect, For all Christians in their vocation:

Almighty and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of your faithful people is governed and sanctified: Receive our supplications and prayers, which we offer before you for all members of your holy Church, that in their vocation and ministry they may truly and devoutly serve you: through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.* (258)

Vocation isn't only for priests or bishops or monks—it's for all Christians. Each of us is called by God to serve God in ministry.

Figuring Out Our Vocation

So what does that mean, exactly? How do we figure out what God is calling us to be and to do? If vocation is about more than just serving God in the church, how do we serve God in the world and in our daily lives?

When I began wrestling with my own vocation, trying to understand what it means to be called and to understand what exactly God was calling me to, a quotation by the noted theologian Frederick

Buechner helped in my discernment. To this day, these words from his book, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, are the most powerful and most deeply true thing I have heard to explain calling: "The place that God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

This definition strikes an important balance. On the one hand, your vocation is a place of deep gladness. You are called by and through the things that you love, the things that bring you joy, the things that uniquely define you. God created each of us with unique gifts, skills, passions, and talents. God's call is for us to be more truly ourselves, not for us to try to be someone else. This is where God stands in direct conflict with culture. Television, Facebook, newspapers, and sports teams all promote certain people as role models. We see these stars,

politicians, or athletes, and we want to be like them. It is fine for us to admire other people and their skills. We can, of course, be inspired and encouraged by the examples of others; the communion of Saints is a powerful reminder of that!

But wanting to be them or even be like them to the exclusion of being ourselves isn't what God has in mind for us. A story in the Jewish midrash, or commentary on the Hebrew scriptures, tells about a man named Rabbi Zusya. Reflecting on his own life, particularly in relationship to the Jewish patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, he reportedly said: "In the coming world, they will not ask me: Why were you not Moses? They will ask me: Why were you not Zusya?" I think that is the question that God asks each of us. I am never going to write like C.S. Lewis or paint like Rembrandt, much

as I might wish to do so. But the question of my vocation is not why I wasn't more like some famous writer or artist, more accomplished or articulate, artistic or literary. The question God asks me, not just at the end of my life, but every day is: "Why were you not yourself?" Embrace who you are rather than wishing you could be someone else.

Finding your vocation means living into who God created *you* to be. You need to ask yourself important questions to discover and explore your deep gladness: What are you doing when you feel most alive? What actions or activities bring you deep joy? When do you feel most fully yourself? These are questions of vocation, of calling.

It would be easy to think, based on this description, that vocation is an every-man for-himself sort of thing; you figure out what you like best and you do it, regardless of anyone or anything else. But that is where the second part of Buechner's understanding of vocation comes into play: "The place that God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

God isn't just calling you to be yourself in some new-age sense of the phrase, where you live totally on your own, independent, focused solely on your deep gladness. Such a life is neither fruitful nor ultimately fulfilling. Your passion, the thing that brings you joy, is only half of the calling. The other half is to find where those passions fit into the hunger—the needs—of the world. We hear this intention clearly in the collect from *The Book of Common Prayer*:

Almighty God our heavenly Father, you declare your glory and show forth your handiwork in the heavens and in the earth: Deliver us in our various occupations from the service of self alone, that we may do the work you give us to do in truth and beauty and for the common good: for the sake of him who came among us as one who serves, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (261)

We are not called to serve ourselves alone but instead to do our work "in truth and beauty and for the common good." We must search for the place where the things that bring us joy answer a need in the world and serve others. At the same time, we are not called to serve the world at the expense of ourselves. Our vocations can and should be difficult and sometimes costly, if we are following the example of Jesus, but they should not be joyless. If we are serving the world, but we are not finding truth, beauty, and joy in that work, then we have not yet found our true calling.

Thus vocation is what happens at the intersection of our gladness and the world's need; it is the thing that we do both because we find fulfillment within ourselves and because we are filling a gap in the fabric of the world. The wonder of God is that God made us to feel deep gladness and made the world with places of deep hunger so that, if we are listening to our lives, we slide into our unique niches in the world. We are most fully alive not when we are focused on the things that bring us individual joy but when we can find deep gladness

in meeting the hunger of the world.

This work of vocation can take surprising forms. Once, I was meeting with a newcomer at my church, a woman named Caitlin. She shared that she wanted to serve God in the church, but she wasn't really sure how. She had been approached to help with Sunday School, but she didn't really enjoy teaching. She had observed the ministry of the lectors and chalice bearers, but she had a paralyzing fear of speaking or serving in public. She had carefully read the notices asking for various church volunteers, but none of them seemed to be the right fit. I asked Caitlin, "What are some things that you love to do? Or where do you feel close to God?" With an embarrassed laugh, she said, "Well, I really love to iron. When I'm feeling overwhelmed or confused, I get out the ironing board and iron my shirts or

even my sheets. It's a time when I can focus and concentrate and reflect on life and maybe even talk to God. But that's not really a church ministry."

I couldn't help but smile at God's sense of humor. What Caitlin didn't know is that, the night before, I had been at a very tense altar guild meeting. The members of the altar guild were faithful, dedicated people who loved tending the sanctuary, keeping the sanctuary lamp blazing and bright, laying out vestments, and quietly preparing the church for worship. But, to a person, they all hated cleaning and ironing the linens. It had become a battle, where members were angry and resentful with one another about who had to launder the linens that week. Into that void stepped a person who found deep joy and connected with God in the act of ironing. When I told Caitlin about the dilemma,

her face lit up. She heard that the place of her deep gladness was the very place of the church's deep need. She had found her vocation within the church.

As Christians, we are called to take part in the life of the church and to share our time and talent alongside our treasure. Like Caitlin, it might take a while to find the right fit, to find *our* vocation within the work of the church. The good news is that there are a variety of different vocations within the church, so there is something for everyone!

Liturgical ministries offer ways for people to participate in leading and facilitating the worship of the church. Acolytes carry the torch and cross, light candles, and lead processions. Altar guilds help with the care of the sanctuary and set up for church services, tending to the holy vessels of the church. Eucharistic ministers help administer communion. Lectors read the lessons. Ushers assist in directing people. These and many other liturgical ministries allow people to find their vocation within the worship of the church.

- Education ministries offer ways for people to participate in teaching and forming disciples. Most congregations have Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, Bible study and book group facilitators, all of whom work to help people love God with their minds as well as their hearts.
- Outreach ministries are ways that the church focuses outward rather than inward and serves

the needs of the community. Many churches have feeding ministries, tutoring programs, community partnerships, and other ways to seek and serve Christ in all persons.

And there are hundreds of other ways to put your gifts, skills, and passions to work for the common good. Those who get excited about spreadsheets and balance books can volunteer as treasurer or help with the stewardship drive. People with a passion for art or music can serve the art and music ministries of the church. Those who find deep joy in tilling the earth might offer to help tend the grounds or start a community garden. If you are seeking your vocation in the ministry of the church, don't hesitate to talk to your priest or church leadership. You might be surprised that the thing

that brings you deep gladness is exactly what the church most needs!

Yet it's important to resist the idea that vocation is only about ministry within or for the church. The reality is that we spend much more of our time outside the church than we do within it. Our collects are clear: our vocations are found in our "various occupations," in the work that we do on a daily basis and the lives that we live in relationship with our families and with the world. Our sense of vocation should extend to our secular occupations. We need to find the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet in our daily lives.

This can be a difficult thing, and it is often a long endeavor. Some people are lucky and find their vocation early in life; others might go through multiple careers in search of their calling. Sometimes it can be hard to balance the differing demands: How can we stay faithful to our deep gladness and also support our families financially?

One of the first things that we have to do is shift our understanding of vocation. We must realize that any *occupation* can be a vocation. Vocation is not limited to the church, nor is it confined to the "helping professions," people like doctors and teachers and counselors. These are wonderful professions where some people find their vocation. But vocation is not one-size-fits-all. There are as many ways to serve God as there are people in the world, and any profession can be a vocation when it combines our deep gladness and meets the world's deep hunger.

Several years ago, I was looking for a place to get some car repairs. A friend recommended a local shop run by a man named Gary. I loved going there —and not just because Gary did great work at a fair price. Being around him was a delight. Gary loved figuring out what was wrong with cars, fixing them, and helping car owners understand what was going on. Sometimes he would call me into the garage to pop the hood open and show me what was wrong. He practically glowed with enthusiasm. He was also really good at solving difficult problems. I think of Gary whenever I think of vocation. Of all the people I've ever known—bishops, priests, doctors, teachers, lawyers—this man lived out his vocation in the most authentic way I've experienced. He found deep joy in what he was doing, and he used his skills to meet a need in the world. Truly, God called this man into auto-repair ministry!

The truth is, we don't have just one vocation in life. We have many. We have our vocations to be in relationship—to be spouses and parents and friends and neighbors. We have our vocations in our daily life and work—in professional callings where we exercise our gifts and meet society's needs. We have our vocations as members of the church—to be faithful in worship, service, and giving for the spread of the kingdom of God.

In all the occupations of our lives, both within and beyond the church walls, we have to do the hard work of discernment in order to discover our vocations. Discernment is the process of thoughtfully evaluating decisions and situations to determine God's desire for our lives. Discernment requires asking tough questions, spending time listening to the witness of our own lives and

the wise words of trusted advisors, and carefully evaluating the choices we face. In the work of discernment, we must always remember that saying yes to something means saying no to other things. When we say yes to a promotion, we might be saying no to more family time or starting over in a new field. Or by saying yes to a job change, we might be saying no to more money or time at church. But when we do this hard work—of saving yes and saying no, of discerning what things to hold on to and what things to let go of, of figuring out who we are called to be and what we are called to do—then we begin to find our vocation, to find the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

Process of Discernment

Whether you're trying to decide what kind of career to pursue, whether to get married or have children, or what ministry you are called to be a part of in your church, discerning your vocation can be a confusing thing. There is no magic-eight-ball solution, no single, foolproof process for making the correct decision. But there are a number of basic steps we can take in order to listen to what God is calling us to do and who God is calling us to be.

1. **Pray.** This first step in discernment is both obvious and easy to overlook. But if we are trying to figure out what we are "supposed" to be doing, it is important to start in conversation with the God who made us, loves us, and calls us each by name! You might use some of the collects

for vocation in *The Book of Common Prayer* or you might use your own, extemporaneous prayers. Whatever you choose, make sure to bring your questions and decisions to God. And don't forget that prayer is a twoway conversation. Take time to stop talking and start listening to God as well. Listen for how God's voice might speak to you in the silence of your heart, in the pull of your affections, in the voices and words of those you love. If you are wrestling with discernment in your life, commit to praying about it daily for a period of time. See if that dedicated time of prayer adds some greater clarity.

2. **Reflect.** The second step of discernment is intentional reflection, looking back over the

course of your life and getting in touch with your current feelings, desires, and thoughts. Explore questions such as: Where is my deep gladness? Where do I see the world's deep hunger? What am I doing when I feel most myself? What do my times of deep spiritual joy look like—what am I doing and who am I with? What would I be saying yes to with this decision? What will I be saying no to with this decision? Who do I imagine I will be in five years if I pursue this new opportunity? Who do I imagine I will be in five years if I say no to this decision?

These questions are just a starting point; others will be specific to your own discernment. Some people are able to simply reflect on these questions in their mind;

- others find it helpful to journal or make lists in order to bring clarity of thought.
- 3. **Discuss.** Our lives do not exist in a vacuum. and God often speaks to us through other people. Though any discernment should begin with you and God, it is important to involve other people in the act of discernment. You might talk with a spouse, a trusted friend or family member, or your priest or spiritual director. Be careful to frame the conversation, not as a request for *advice* but instead as an opportunity for discernment. Begin by asking them to simply listen, giving you time to voice your own reflections aloud. Ask them about the things that they see in you that you might be unable (or unwilling) to see. This time of discussion

- is not about having someone else make a decision for you; instead, try to seek out people who will help inform and support you as you move forward in your own decision.
- 4. **Pray.** Return, once again, to prayer (in fact, praying all along the way is a good idea!). You might have new things to offer up to God in prayer, or you might hear what God is saying to you in a new way.

For Reflection

- This chapter is based on the idea that God calls everyone to particular work or purpose. Sometimes we have limited the idea of calling to only those ordained. Is this broader way of thinking about calling helpful to you? Why or why not?
- Can you see a difference between doing the things that might be immediately gratifying to you and doing the things that God calls you to do? When might these be the same and

when might they be different?

- Who are the people you know who are most clearly or abundantly living out their vocation? How can you tell they are doing what God called them to do?
- Do you believe that you are doing what God has called you to do with your life? If so, what is that like? If not, why not?

