

# SHAPING A FAITHFUL LIFE: DISCERNMENT AND DISCIPLESHIP FOR YOUNG ADULTS

KATHLEEN HENDERSON STAUDT

## **Purpose and Rationale:**

People in their twenties and thirties-- whether they are students, or entering the workforce, or living at home trying to figure out “what’s next” -- are in a stage of life where questions of meaning, purpose and identity loom large. They need the company of others at their stage of life who are asking the same questions. They may also find it encouraging to learn that the Christian tradition offers many resources for approaching these questions, especially through practices of “discernment.” The resources collected in “Shaping a Faithful Life” aim to equip young adults to explore the deep questions of meaning and purpose that have always been at the heart of the Christian spiritual journey, and to find ways to connect these questions to the call to faithful living that the tradition has called “discipleship.”

## **Young Adults and “Church”**

It’s important to remember that people in their twenties and thirties who are drawn to a church -identified community often have little “in common” besides the fact that they all are, for one reason or another, in this group. Their lives may or may not intersect in any other way. Some may be married, some single; their professions, interests and temperaments may be quite different. Yet for some reason they are all being drawn to something that the church may have to offer. There is opportunity here: to pass on what the Christian tradition offers, in the resources of Scripture, liturgy and spiritual practice. This is best done, not so much by systematic instruction- but by exploring how the tradition helps with questions that adults are asking as they seek to shape a faithful life, and making connections between their particular life experience and the call to transformation that is at the heart of Christian faith.

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

## **“Discernment” and “Discipleship” - defining the words:**

This program invites leaders and groups to use and develop the concepts of

“discernment” and “discipleship,” even though these may not be terms that are familiar to the young adults in the group. They help people not only to enter the process of “meaning-making” that is so important at this time of life, but also to connect that process to spiritual practices that have long been part of the Christian tradition, though they need to be reclaimed for our postmodern, some would say “post-Christian” context.

### **What is “Discernment”?**

Discernment, from Latin roots that point to a process of sorting out, distinguishing among options, is the practice of attending to God’s presence and seeking direction -- in times of decision making and indeed at all times in our lives. It always involves asking questions: “Should I choose this path rather than that one? What is the meaning of the experience I am having?” “What is the most faithful choice in this situation?” Christian traditions of discernment almost always involve conversations with others who are on the same journey: The Ignatian tradition does this in consultation with a spiritual guide or director; Benedictine discernment is practiced in the context of community life and meditation on Scripture; Quakers seek clarity through prayerful listening and consultation with a “clearness committee.” “Shaping a Faithful Life” adapts methods from these and other approaches to discernment in order to help young adults to see what rich resources Christian spiritual practice offers for the questions most central to their lives.

### **Discipleship: Shaping a Faithful Life**

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

## **Methodology and Context**

### **Meaning-Making in the Now: Identity and Community**

Underlying this approach to Young Adult spiritual formation is Sharon Daloz Parks’s definition of faith not as “belief” but as a process of “meaning-making.” The journey of faith is a journey toward making sense of our world, *beginning where we are*. People in their twenties and thirties need safe places to sort out their own ways of making sense of the world -- distinguishing their experience from inherited traditions of parents and also from the many voices in the surrounding culture that seek to define them as a cohort of consumers or even by labels like “GenX”, “GenY” or “Millennials.” These understandings of common values of a cohort may seem to be important steps in the journey of identity formation and of faith, but as people enter adulthood they also need --

and seem to crave - invitations to ask deeper and more fundamental questions like “Who am I now?” “What is it about me that I can claim apart from the expectations of others,” “What and whom do I love”, “Where is my passion?”

Parks points out that for young adults there are two great “yearnings” working together: the desire to claim individual agency or identity and the desire to belong to a community. Electronic networking has recognized this in its invitations to people to identify a “profile” -- a face they present to the world -- and to join “groups” and “networks” and make “friends.” This vocabulary is an everyday tool nowadays for most people born after 1985. It is not uncommon for young adults to be together in a room and also connected to conversations on smartphones and computers with the world outside the room. Older adults may deplore this but it is actually a condition of people’s lives now: it is possible to be in constant contact with a wide variety of voices. But many young adults I’ve talked to also express a desire for ways to be present to one another “in the room.” Some even suggest that this is a skill that they fear they are losing.

Parks observes that many young adults crave a “hearth” -- a place of community and safety where they can rest from the challenges of the surrounding culture, which so importantly shapes early adulthood, and be fully themselves with a group of trusted friends and mentors, in a safe and welcoming place. The materials provided here are designed to guide the conversation for groups of young adults gathered round whatever “hearth” the Church provides for them, as they explore their own approaches to the task of “shaping a faithful life.”

Resources for this introduction:

Sharon Daloz Parks. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith*. Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Ben Campbell Johnson. *Hearing God’s Call: Ways of Discernment for Clergy and Laity*. Eerdmans, 2002

## **SHAPING A FAITHFUL LIFE: PRACTICES OF DISCERNMENT FOR YOUNG ADULTS**

Building on the first Zeteo program put out by Forward Day By Day, "Shaping a Faithful Life" provides a framework and structure for groups of young adults to meet together and explore 6 key questions that can help them make the connections between faith and practice that shape a meaningful life, drawing on the resources of Christian tradition.

Each module in this series includes two components: "Resource Materials" can be used in a study group, alone, or in an online discussion to help explore both ancient and contemporary spiritual traditions and practices that Christians have drawn on as they seek to live faithfully in their daily lives. These include readings from Scripture, poetry and spiritual writings as well as questions for reflection

"Group Practice" develops a structure for groups of people to share their experiences and questions and to learn practices of deep listening and discernment, drawing on the tradition of the "clearness committee" and the model of the "circle of trust" developed by Quaker writer and group leader Parker Palmer. Each week is organized around a question that can guide both personal and group exploration.

After the first, introductory session, each module will focus on one of the following questions, providing suggestions for use in either a time-limited weekly series, an ongoing group, or a weekend retreat.

### ***Session I: Questions that Help us Shape a Faithful Life***

In this first session, the concept of "discernment" is introduced, as a practice that invites us not so much to seek answers as to ask questions in the context of a life of faith. Using the first three questions -- "Profile, Purpose and "Passion" as the basis for an "icebreaker" exercise, it invites participants to interview one another, and then introduce one another, using the first responses that come to mind. The process of exploring these questions together, and reflecting on which ones are most challenging for people, helps to establish norms about listening and hearing one another and also creates a group process where it is safe to ask questions. Each subsequent session will "drill down" into exploration of one or more of the discernment questions, using Scripture and the spiritual tradition to illuminate participants' shared experiences.

**•The "PROFILE" Question: What do you "do?" How do you answer this question at a social gathering (how do you describe your professional or "public" identity)? A person exploring this question will be looking at the face presented to the world and how that connects with his/her own sense of identity. It is closely related to the second question --**

**•The "PURPOSE" Question: What is your "real work," or, to put it another way: what do you most enjoy doing: what is it that, when you are doing it, makes you feel that you are most fully and truly "yourself.?" Many young adults do not yet know the answer to this question, but the process of asking it, with a group that is listening carefully, can be of help in exploring one's deepest values and motivations as well as one's "gifts."**

**•The PASSION Question: In the world of work, community, relationships where you find yourself, what do you feel must change? Where in your daily life or work do you want to shake your fists and cry out in frustration, "SOMETHING must be done about \_\_\_\_?"**

### ***Session II: Dreaming With God: The "Passion" Question***

**The PASSION Question: In the world of work, community, relationships where you find yourself, what do you feel must change? Where in your daily life or work do you want to shake your fists and cry out in frustration, "SOMETHING must be done about \_\_\_\_?"** This question invites people to look at a vision for the world - the "dream of God" for a particular situation, without necessarily coming up with a solution. Asking this question, in dialogue with Scripture and with attention to the imagination, can help us

to connect more honestly with our calling as Christians in a broken world.

This session will invite participants to look at the deep brokenness of our world and pay attention to their own awareness that “this is not the way things are supposed to be.” Beginning from that awareness of brokenness, they are invited into an imaginative exercise of “dreaming with God” -- trying to imagine one aspect of the world as they know it from a “God’s eye” perspective. Using a guided meditation that explores God’s thoughts at the moment before the “fall”, at the beginning of the Genesis story, participants are invited into their own imaginative exercise of “dreaming with God”. This exercise invites and enables participants to draw on hope and imagination to truly own what most moves them about the world’s brokenness. Theologically this process is connected to Christ’s invitation to participate with him in the work of reconciliation and healing in the world, beginning from where our hearts are drawn.

### ***Session III: The PEOPLE Question: Relationships and Community***

***The PEOPLE QUESTION: Who are the People whose voices guide you in your spiritual life? Where do you hear the voice of God in your human relationships? What is missing in those relationships?***  
People in their 20’s and 30’s are being shaped by their friendships and intimate relationships, and it can be helpful to reflect on the importance of community and relationships in the Christian life, recognizing where we hear the voice of God in those closest to us.

While the first two sessions focused on individual identity and sense of call, this one invites a life review using a meditation on the people who have been formative in their lives -- both people they have known and people they have admired, read, been inspired by. Drawing on the theological idea of the church as a “communion of saints” past and present, and the sources of our faith in the witness of others, participants are invited to sketch out and share a “family reunion” of important people in their lives. In the process they are encouraged to attend to the growth of their own life of faith at various phases of development.

*Clearness Committee Introduced:*

This session will also introduce the practice of discernment in community through an exercise that demonstrates the Quaker practice of the “clearness committee”. Developed most helpfully by Parker Palmer, this practice enables young adults to listen to each others’ questions and experiences and go deeper together into the process of exploring the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

### ***Session IV: The PRACTICE Question: Shaping a Faithful Life***

***The PRACTICE Question: What activities or "practices" do you engage in to help you live a life that matches your deepest values about time, money, relationships, the needs of others? Your own need to stay grounded in what you most deeply believe? What seems to be missing or out of balance in your spiritual practice?***

In this session participants will be invited to reflect on the ways that they put their basic values into “practice.” Working in small groups, they share ways that they find balance in three aspects of their lives: time, money, and relationships. The focus on these areas of life is meant to open up a discussion of what it means to put our faith into “practice” -- and begins to make connections between spiritual practice and Christian discipleship.

In the “going deeper” part of this session participants will work in small groups using a process based on the “clearness committee,” to explore questions that they may bring about specific life decisions.

### ***Session V: The Prayer Question:***

## ***Showing Up and Paying Attention***

**•The PRAYER Question: *How do you pray? Where in your daily life and work have you been most often or most clearly aware of the presence of God? How do you respond to this awareness?***

In this session, participants will be invited to share their own experiences and approaches to prayer. It will also introduce two broadly defined approaches to prayer that I classify as “showing up” prayers and “paying attention” prayers. Two guided meditations help participants to experience these approaches to prayer. The first offers a way of praying that takes very little time but can be used during a definite prayer-time set aside during each day. The second offers a way to “pray a day of life,” attending to the ways we experience God’s presence in the ordinary experiences of life.

## ***Session VI: Discernment and Discipleship: Your Piece of God’s work in the World***

Returning to Scripture stories in which Jesus sends the disciples out on mission, this session offers resources that help participants to pull together what they have learned and explore what it may mean for their own sense of “call,” where they are right now in life. This session will invite one more experience of the “clearness committee” process and will also offer a structure that will enable those interested to continue this practice, serving as “ad hoc” discernment partners for one another as they continue in their efforts to shape a faithful life.

--