

LIVING LIKE THEY BELIEVE

VOCATION

How does God call us to live our faith?

A Duke Youth Academy and Faith & Leadership curriculum

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Meet Ella Russell, Joshua Bingaman, Jillian “JJ” Simmons and Anthony Suber. Like you, they are navigating challenge, suffering and mess in their lives. They are seeking to understand how God is at work in their daily lives. They are discerning God’s call on their lives.

Their honest and relatable personal stories, designed for small groups to explore over four weeks, invite participants to wonder: How are we called to live our faith? How is God making all things new? How do some of the practices of our faith, such as baptism and communion, invite us into ongoing discernment?

The stories of Ella, Joshua, Jillian and Anthony are told as visual poems, a unique form of filmmaking that combines creative videography, storytelling and music. This evocative style is unlike other available resources for Christians seeking to study Scripture together.

“Vocation” challenges groups to pay attention to how God calls us in ordinary and mundane ways and how we can live into the fullness of God’s call. Each session features one of the films, Scripture study, and creative practices for participants to do both as a group and on their own. Sessions are designed for high school youth, college students or adults.



This curriculum has been designed in partnership with the [Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation](#), a yearlong program that invites high school students to live in Christ and to think deeply about being Christian. It combines a weeklong residency on the Duke University campus with a year of continuing mentorship, practice and online community.

The curriculum appears on [Faith & Leadership](#), the online magazine of Leadership Education at Duke Divinity, which designs educational services, develops intellectual resources, and facilitates networks of institutions to strengthen the ecology of Christian institutions that enable U.S. congregations and pastors to flourish.

Faith & Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Theologian Frederick Buechner is often quoted as saying, “Vocation is the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” In this set of four visual poems with accompanying lesson plans, a small group can explore how God calls all Christians to live their faith.

How beautiful will be the day when all the baptized understand that their work, their job, is a priestly work, that just as I celebrate Mass at this altar, so each carpenter celebrates Mass at his workbench, and each metalworker, each professional, each doctor with the scalpel, the market woman at her stand, is performing a priestly office! How many cabdrivers, I know, listen to this message there in their cabs; you are a priest at the wheel, my friend, if you work with honesty, consecrating that taxi of yours to God, bearing a message of peace and love to the passengers who ride in your cab.

-- Oscar Romero, Nov. 20, 1977

Christian vocation is more than the work of pastors, priests and ministers. As Oscar Romero, the archbishop of El Salvador, explained, all Christians are called to a priestly work, to consecrate their taxicabs and office desks to God. This holistic understanding of Christian vocation envelops all members of the church: young and old, staffer and entrepreneur, unemployed and underemployed, student and retiree. It goes beyond our careers or economic status and reaches into every aspect of our lives: personal and family commitments, social and community commitments, explicit ministry commitments.

But what does it look like to live our faith?

In this series of four visual poems with accompanying lesson plans, we will explore the ways four ordinary people live out their Christian vocation.

In the first lesson, “Vocation as worship,” Ella Russell, the creator and owner of E-dub-a-licious Treats, sees each task of her work in the bakery as an opportunity to honor God. As God provides Ella with the resources and opportunities to do good work, Ella returns to God thanksgiving and praise and leads a community of people to delight in what God is doing in her life. Ella compels us to reflect on how our daily lives become an act of worship.

In “Vocation as service,” we meet entrepreneur and boot-maker Joshua Bingaman, who encourages us to reflect on how Christian vocation goes beyond service to the self and connects to the deep needs of the community. Joshua’s story of healing and transformation in community is creatively retold through his work as a boot-maker. Joshua challenges us to humbly serve others in all that we do.

Jillian “JJ” Simmons, in “Vocation as obligation,” invites us to consider how Jesus’ love obligates us to live differently, reflecting Christ in the world. JJ’s faith in Jesus compels her to go about her work as a radio personality, nonprofit leader and mother with a drive to bring change in the world. Her grateful obligation inspires a renewed courage to follow the call God places in our lives.

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In “Vocation as commission,” sculptor Anthony Suber challenges us to get to the work of telling the story of God’s love in tangible ways, fulfilling Jesus’ Great Commission. When we answer God’s call and begin to see the imperfect parts of ourselves and others with new eyes -- God’s eyes of love -- we are able to tell a different story about those imperfections. With God’s eyes of love, we are commissioned to live differently.

Accompanying each film, there is a guide for conversation, Scripture study, practice and prayer. The guides are designed to suit a broad range of audiences and ages, from high school youth to adults. Through open-ended questions, they allow facilitators to shape the conversation to meet the particular needs of their groups. We encourage facilitators to watch the films ahead of time to become familiar with the people and themes in each.

The lessons follow a basic pattern:

- Gathering conversation, introducing the theme
- Visual poem viewing and discussion
- Scripture study, exploring the intersection of the poem and God’s word
- Practice
 - In the room – kinesthetic or creative exercises to engage group participants in a deeper way
 - In the community – challenges to take the conversation about the poem and Scripture into participants’ daily lives
- Closing prayer

We have provided brief commentaries on the Scripture passages. If you would like deeper scriptural commentary, we recommend the [Resource Library on Ministry Matters](#).

Interested in further reflection on the idea of vocation? Please see our resources section below the lesson plans.

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Vocation: How does God call us to live our faith?

Lesson 1: Vocation as worship

FACILITATOR'S INTRODUCTION

This visual poem features Ella Russell, the creator and owner of E-dub-a-licious Treats, a bakery in Houston, Texas. In this first lesson in the track on vocation, we focus on Ella's joy in living out her calling and her baptism as she shares gifts with the community through her work as a baker.

Psalm 65, a psalm of communal thanksgiving and worship, expresses gratitude to God for all that God does to care for creation (delivering God's people, silencing the seas, watering the earth, providing grain). God is the great provider in all parts of our lives, and our fitting response is to worship!



Ella approaches her vocation as an act of worship. She considers each step in the baking process to communicate reverence and honor to God. As we think about our own vocations, Ella and the psalmist compel us to reflect on how our daily work can be an act of worship.

We strongly recommend making some cookies to enjoy with this film!

MATERIALS

- Cookies (optional)
- Printed copies of [Psalm 65](#) (See Participant's Handouts)
- Pens, colored pencils or markers
- Journals for participants (optional)

GATHERING

Develop an opening prayer that works for your setting and community, or pray the one provided:

Glorious God, you can make a way when we see no way, and for that we praise you. Help us to see the ways we can bring honor to your name and worship you every day of our lives, in this conversation and beyond. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Since this will be your group's first gathering to explore vocation, you may want to set the stage by providing some of the information from the description for this track.

Turn the discussion to worship with the following questions:

- What is the purpose of worship?
- What do you do in worship?

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VISUAL POEM

[Watch the film](#), share the cookies, and discuss:

- What did you notice about Ella or the poem?
- What struck you as significant, beautiful or important?

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Distribute printed copies of Psalm 65 and pens, colored pencils or markers. Read the psalm aloud, either in unison or with one reader.

Give the group five minutes or so to reread the psalm, noting significant words or ideas, connections to Ella's poem, and other thoughts that may arise. Then share with one another.

Questions for conversation:

- In light of verses 9-10, how does God water the earth through Ella? What do Ella's cookies have to do with her baptism?
- How does Ella's vocation to bake spring from her baptism? How is this like worship?
- What are the Crumbheads' responses to Ella's work? What does Ella's relationship with the Crumbheads tell us about the connection between community and worship?
- Who is watering your community and life? How can you see God's work in them? How can you give honor to God in response?
- Do you feel that your vocation is connected with worship? Why or why not? How can you begin to imagine them more deeply connected?

PRACTICE

We suggest that your group practice what you've learned in two ways -- together in the room and independently in the community.

In the room

As a group, put together a list of tasks that would serve the group's needs for gathering each week (removing trash, providing refreshments, arranging furniture). Divide the tasks according to preferences, gifts and skills. Then discuss:

- How does sharing the work of our gathering times honor God?
- How is picking up trash an act of worship?

In the community

Indulge yourself with your favorite treat. In your journal, reflect on these questions:

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- What do you love about this treat?
- How might the preparation of this treat have been an act of worship?
- How can you express gratitude to the maker and to God for the delight it provides?
- How can you be inspired to incorporate worship into your daily life?

CLOSING PRAYER

Develop a closing prayer that works for your setting and community, or pray this one by Evelyn Underhill, from “Prayers from the Heart” (ed. Richard Foster):

Lord! Give me courage and love to open the door and constrain You to enter, whatever the disguise You come in, even before I fully recognize my guest.

Come in! Enter my small life!

Lay Your sacred hands on all the common things and small interests of that life and bless and change them. Transfigure my small resources, make them sacred. And in them give me Your very Self.

Amen.

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Vocation: How does God call us to live our faith?

Lesson 2: Vocation as service

FACILITATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Joshua Bingaman describes his vocation as an entrepreneur who opens creative businesses so that he can be with people. He has opened coffeehouses in San Francisco and Austin, Texas, and is the founder and designer of Helm Boots. In each of his business ventures, he says, he is drawn to places of suffering and the stories of healing and transformation he finds there. “People hurt people,” he says, “but people also heal people.” God calls us into community with one another.



John 13 tells the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, a striking display of humility. Footwashing was a practice of personal hygiene, hospitality and ritual, but it was typically performed by servants or by guests washing their own feet. Jesus' example, as he prepares to be arrested and crucified, challenges us into humble service.

Joshua's commitment to see his work as a service of healing and transformation and Jesus' humble act of footwashing are powerful examples of how Christian vocation goes beyond service to oneself and connects to the deep needs of the community.

MATERIALS

- Bibles
- Basin filled with warm water
- Hand towels
- Copies of the weekly time inventory

GATHERING

Offer an opening prayer, either your own selection or this one:

Faithful God, as we dig into your word and your calling in our lives today, give us ears to hear your yearnings, our community's yearnings and our own. Give us wisdom and strength to answer them. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Begin with a reflection on the idea of service:

- What does it mean to serve?
- What kinds of jobs do you associate with service?
- Do you have an awareness of God's presence when you are serving or you witness serving?

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VISUAL POEM

[Watch the film](#). Consider these questions:

- What moments or phrases stand out for you in Joshua's story?
- What did you connect with? What made you uncomfortable?

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Hand out Bibles and read [John 13:1-17](#). Ask:

- What did you hear in this story? What does it mean that one of Jesus' last acts of earthly ministry was washing the disciples' feet?
- How might washing the disciples' feet have brought Jesus comfort as he prepared for his arrest and death? How does healing the brokenhearted heal Joshua? How do Jesus and Joshua demonstrate the connection between vulnerability, love and service? Have you had a similar experience?
- What yearning does Joshua perceive in the world? How do coffee and boots answer that yearning? How does Joshua's vocation extend beyond coffee and boots?
- What yearning does Jesus strive to answer in washing the disciples' feet? Jesus also tells the disciples, "You also ought to wash one another's feet." What yearning is he pushing them to answer? What yearnings does Jesus push us to answer?
- How are you answering the yearnings in your community?

PRACTICE

We suggest that your group practice what it is learning in two ways -- together in the room and independently in the community.

In the room

Option 1: Footwashing

Set up a basin filled with warm water in front of a chair. (If you have a group larger than 10, you may want to set up two stations in the interest of time.) Invite a member of the group to sit in the chair as you demonstrate how footwashing is practiced:

- Hold the person's foot with one hand. Cup your other hand and, working slowly, pour water over the foot three times.
- Gently dry the foot with a hand towel.
- The person whose foot has been washed then takes over the washing responsibility.

By the end of the activity, which should be practiced in silence, every member of the group should have washed a foot and had his or her foot washed.

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Reflect together on the experience:

- Is this your first time performing footwashing? If not, how does this experience feel different from other experiences you've had with this practice?
- In your daily life, how often do you enter into intimate spaces with other people? What might be blocking you from being with people in dirty, messy places?
- How does this practice change your understanding of the word "service"?

Option 2: Gratitude

One of Joshua's practices is to name his boot designs after people who have contributed to his own healing. Gratitude can fuel service in the world. On your own, take a notecard and write a quick list of people, places or things that have prompted healing in your life. In groups of three or four, share your responses to these questions:

- How does your gratitude for these people, places or things fuel your service?
- How can or does your gratitude for these people, places or things compel you to answer the yearnings of the community?

In the community

Using the printed weekly time inventory, make notes of a typical week in your life. Then, using two pens of different colors, mark when you feel drawn deeper into the kind of loving service Jesus offered in footwashing and when you feel pulled away from that kind of loving service. Reflect:

- When is your greatest joy in a typical week? When do you experience the greatest connection to God and other people?
- Which color was more dominant? Are you surprised by what you found?
- Are there times in your week that are neutral, neither drawing you toward nor pulling you away from loving service?
- Could you change your mindset about the times of neutrality or pulling away to transform them?

CLOSING PRAYER

You may wish to develop your own prayer or offer the following prayer from the Church of the Province of the West Indies, from "An African Prayer Book," by Desmond Tutu:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, the privilege is ours to share in the loving, healing, reconciling mission of your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, in this age and wherever we are. Since without you we can do no good thing.

*May your Spirit make us wise;
May your Spirit guide us;
May your Spirit renew us;*

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*May your Spirit strengthen us;
So that we will be:
Strong in faith,
Discerning in proclamation,
Courageous in witness,
Persistent in good deeds.
This we ask through the name of the Father.
Amen.*

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Vocation: How does God call us to live our faith?

Lesson 3: Vocation as obligation

FACILITATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Jillian "JJ" Simmons is a veteran radio host from Cincinnati, Ohio, who has worked in her hometown, as well as New York City, Indianapolis and now Houston. Her experience as a single mother led her to create the I'm Me Foundation, a nonprofit that provides positive social experiences and character-building training to middle school and high school girls. Jillian feels a deep sense of grateful obligation to change the culture that once threatened to pull her away from the woman God created her to be.



In John 15:1-17, Jesus issues a stark command to the disciples to love one another as the fruit of their love for the Father and for him. Jesus illustrates his relationships with the Father and the disciples as vine, farmer and branches. Bearing the good fruit of love depends on the branches' full and healthy connection with the vine and the farmer.

Without Jesus, Jillian's life would look radically different. Her connection to Jesus compels her to use her work as a radio personality, mother and nonprofit leader to change the way young women -- and all people -- see beauty and love. Similarly, Jesus' love for us obligates us to live differently, reflecting Christ in the world and bearing the fruit of love in all that we do.

MATERIALS

- Bibles
- Paper and pens

GATHERING

You may choose to offer your own opening prayer or the one provided:

Triune God, your love for us places a demand on our lives; it calls us to a life of faith and love. As we explore the joy of this obligation, help us to experience your love in a new way. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Begin with a conversation on the experiences the group has with obligations:

- What are your obligations in life?
- Who determines your obligations? How have those people communicated those obligations?
- How do you feel about your obligations?

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VISUAL POEM

[Watch the film](#). Allow for reflection. Consider:

- What moments or phrases stood out to you in Jillian's story?
- How does Jillian's work reflect Christ in the world?

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Hand out Bibles and read John 15:1-17 aloud. Ask:

- What did you hear in this parable? What is Jesus telling us about the interrelationship between Jesus, the Father and the disciples?
- Jillian says she struggled with whether she needed to be who others wanted her to be. How did she overcome that obstacle? How is this connected to the parable's explanation of pruning? Where have you experienced or observed this kind of pruning?
- What kind of fruit does Jesus say comes from a vine that is connected to him and the Father? In what way does Jillian bear this kind of fruit? What is necessary for her to bear that fruit? In the many aspects of Jillian's life as parent, radio personality and nonprofit leader, how does she demonstrate the interrelationship between Jesus, the Father, herself and the community?
- In the parable, Jesus says, "I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (15:16 NRSV). How does Jillian live out that obligation to bear fruit that will last? What kind of obstacles does Jillian face in living it out? How did she develop a feeling of gratitude in spite of the obstacles that she faced?
- How does being connected to Jesus' love obligate and compel you to live differently? To see God's calling in your life as more than just your paid employment?

PRACTICE

We invite you to practice what you are learning in the room, with your group, and throughout the week in the community.

In the room

Invite each member of the group to write down the main roles that make up his or her vocation (worker, parent, friend, spouse, volunteer, etc.). Each participant should reflect on why he or she has each role, what he or she likes or dislikes about it, and how God is present or absent in it.

Each person should find a partner and spend a few minutes sharing reflections and considering these questions:

- How do these roles add up to an expression of Jesus' love?
- Where do you feel Jesus' love obligating you to make a change?

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In the community

Ask a person you respect in your faith community the following questions:

- What do you understand to be your vocation -- God's calling on your life? How do your various roles and obligations connect to your vocation? How do they bear the fruit of Jesus' love?
- What challenges have you faced over the years in living out your vocation?
- How has your relationship to God empowered you to overcome the challenges?
- What practices would you encourage someone to adopt to cultivate a lifetime of bearing the fruit of Jesus' love?

CLOSING PRAYER

You may wish to say a prayer of your own or the following prayer by Alan Paton, from "Prayers from the Heart" (ed. Richard Foster):

O Lord,

*open my eyes that I may see the needs of others;
open my ears that I may hear their cries;
open my heart so that they need not be without succor;*

*let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong,
nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich.*

*Show me where love and hope and faith are needed,
and use me to bring them to those places.*

*And so open my eyes and my ears
that I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for thee.
Amen.*

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Vocation: How does God call us to live our faith?

Lesson 4: Vocation as commission

FACILITATOR'S INTRODUCTION

This visual poem features Anthony Suber, a sculptor based in Houston, Texas. Anthony creates sculptures from metal, wood and found objects to tell new stories about the materials, himself and his community. He also prompts the people who view his art to see themselves and their world with new eyes, commissioning them to live differently.

As the early church lived out Jesus' commission to go and make disciples, his followers encountered many stumbling blocks. Paul addresses one of the stumbling blocks for the early church in 1 Corinthians 13 -- specifically, how to love one another well when divisions between different groups become tense and hurtful. Paul calls a church that is divided over social class to treat each other with patient, kind and humble love.



This kind of love provokes a new way of seeing and being in the world. When we see the imperfect parts of ourselves and others with God's eyes of love, we are able to tell new stories about them, just as Anthony tells new stories with his imperfect materials. Anthony's visual poem challenges us to get to the work of telling the story of God's love in tangible ways, fulfilling Jesus' Great Commission.

MATERIALS

- Image of utensils (See Participant's Handouts and [found here](#)), or another image of your choosing
- Bibles
- Participants' smartphones

GATHERING

Begin with a prayer, either of your own choosing or the one provided:

Merciful God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, much of our world, our community and our lives is in disarray. We struggle with feelings of overwhelm. Give us a vision for your calling in our lives and how we might see our world, our community and our lives through your eyes of love. Amen.

Ask your group to observe silently for a moment the provided image or something of your own choosing. Then ask:

- What do you see in this? Why do you see that?

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VISUAL POEM

[Watch Anthony's film.](#) Invite participants to offer reflections, or prompt conversation with these questions:

- Where did you see imperfection in Anthony's story?
- What kind of story does Anthony tell about imperfection? What changed his story?

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Read [1 Corinthians 13:1-8a](#) aloud.

Questions for conversation:

- Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, where division and difference in social class have caused great problems. In Corinthians, what does love do? What is the consequence of the absence of love? How does love change the story?
- How does Anthony use art to challenge the way we tell the story of imperfection and brokenness? How do you see Anthony expressing the kind of love Paul commands? What does Anthony hope will happen to people who view his art?
- How might retelling our story through love change us or commission us to new things?
- What is God calling you to see with eyes of love? To create with hands of love? Where is God calling you to go with feet of love?

PRACTICE

Invite participants to practice what they are learning in the room, as a group, and throughout the week in the community.

In the room

Ask each person to take a selfie with his or her smartphone, and then find a partner. If a participant does not have a smartphone, make sure he or she chooses a partner who does.

Invite the partners to engage in the following exercise:

- Contemplate your selfie as "found art." What imperfections do you see? Share these observations with your partner.
- Looking at your partner's selfie with eyes of love, share with him or her what you see.
- Write a one-sentence commission for your partner, describing how God sends him or her to live out God's story in the world. Text this sentence to your partner.

Discuss:

- What happens when we see ourselves as God sees us?

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- How does it change our stories?
- How does it change our understanding of our vocation?

In the community

Post the commission you received during the session in a place where you will see it every day for a week (bathroom mirror, cellphone lock screen, refrigerator door). Pray over the commission each day and determine at least one concrete action that you can do to begin living out the story of God's love.

CLOSING PRAYER

Choose your own prayer, or conclude with this poem, "Blessing for a Broken Vessel," by Jan Richardson, from "Circle of Grace":

Do not despair.

*You hold the memory
of what it was
to be whole.*

*It lives deep
in your bones.
It abides
in your heart
that has been torn
and mended
a hundred times.*

*It persists
in your lungs
that know the mystery
of what it means
to be full,
to be empty,
to be full again.*

*I am not asking you
to give up your grip
on the shards you clasp
so close to you*

*but to wonder
what it would be like
for those jagged edges
to meet each other*

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*in some new pattern
that you have never imagined,
that you have never dared
to dream.*

Amen.

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Resources

If you're interested in exploring the topic of vocation more deeply, we invite you to engage these resources.

BOOKS

["Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens," edited by Dorothy Bass and Don C. Richter](#)

["The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times," by Dean Brackley](#)

["Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good," by Steven Garber](#)

["The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and 'Women's Work,'" by Kathleen Norris](#)

["Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation," by Parker Palmer](#)

["Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation," edited by William C. Placher](#)

["Transforming Vocation," by Sam Portaro](#)

["An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith," by Barbara Brown Taylor](#)

FILMS AND VIDEOS

["Driving Miss Daisy"](#)

["Finding Forrester"](#)

["Schindler's List"](#)

WEB RESOURCES

[Theology of Work Project](#)

[Practicing Our Faith](#)

FAITH & LEADERSHIP

[Allison Backous Troy: Livelihood and the path between vocation and work](#)

[Andrea Palpant Dilley: It's time to honor the hard work of raising children](#)

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[Dave Young Kim: Living out a calling as a muralist](#)

[Katherine Leary Alsdorf: We're made to work](#)

[Living out the gospel by teaching, not preaching](#)

[Martha Simmons: I love the work of the church](#)

[Scott Holmes: Lawyering, the Quaker way](#)

[The woman behind Textweek.com](#)

For additional resources on vocation, visit Faith & Leadership's [vocation](#) page.