



CREATING A CULTURE OF CALLING

Reflective Writing: A Tool for Discerning Calling

Curriculum for Faith Formation Leaders

A Project for Vibrant Faith, C3 Initiative

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- To give participants a basic understanding of Reflective Writing as a spiritual discipline.
- To show participants how Reflective Writing is connected to the Christian concept of calling from a theological vantage point.
- To teach participants how to use Reflective Writing as tool to hear God's voice in their own discernment of calling.

WORKSHOP CONTENT:

This workshop introduces participants to Reflective Writing through the following components:

- Teaching Segment
- Reflective Writing Time
- Small Group Reflection
- Large Group Reflection

WORKSHOP MATERIALS:

The following materials should be provided by the host church or faith formation leaders:

- Writing utensils – pencils, pens, etc.
- Loose leaf paper – both lined and unlined is preferable to give participants options.
- Printed out handouts for all participants, including a few extras for last minute attendees.
- Option for snacks or full meal, drinks, plastic plates, utensils, cups, and napkins.

FAITH FORMATION LEADERS SHOULD ADVISE PARTICIPANTS TO BRING THE FOLLOWING IF DESIRED:

- A journal or other preferred paper.
- Preferred writing utensil.
- Bible

**Please note that the host church or faith formation leaders should tell participants that they will be providing writing materials ahead of time while also having the option for participants to bring their own. People often forget or neglect to bring writing materials, which is why having them available at the workshop is important. Writing materials should be placed on tables where participants will be sitting to easily access them.



RECOMMENDED READINGS:

Faith formation leaders may find these readings helpful in conceptualizing the teaching portion of the workshop, as well as in expanding their understanding of the Christian concept of calling as it relates to theology, identity, and writing as subcategories. The themes in Parker Palmer's book *Let Your Life Speak* are of particular relevance to Reflective Writing.

- *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
- *Invitation to a Journey: A road map for spiritual formation*, by M Robert Mulholland Jr. and Ruth Haley Barton
- *Called: My journey to C.S. Lewis' house and back again*, by Ryan Pemberton
- *The Gift of Being Yourself*, by David Benner
- *The Sacred Journey: A memoir of early days*, Frederick Buechner
- *Now and Then: A memoir of vocation*, Frederick Buechner
- *Listening for God: A minister's journey through silence and doubt*, Renita Weems

TEACHING SEGMENT

The teaching segment of the workshop will be focused largely on giving participants a basic understanding of Reflective Writing (as distinguished from other practices such as journaling or creative writing), and what specifically makes Reflective Writing a spiritual discipline. It is understood that most participants will already have a working definition and conceptualization of calling due to the efforts of the C3 Initiative. Thus, faith formation leaders will focus their teaching primarily on how the concept of calling is both informed and expanded by Reflective Writing.

The following page includes an outline intended to assist faith formation leaders in structuring their teaching segment. Faith formation leaders can treat this as a script that they can say verbatim, which will be in this regular font.

Words in *italics* indicate instructions that will not be said aloud.

Words in **bold** indicate headings that help to structure the teaching and that will not be said aloud.

Faith formation leaders can choose to fill in illustrative examples from their personal lives as they desire and see fit. This is not required; however personal examples can be helpful both in elucidating concepts and establishing a deeper and more personal connection with participants.



TEACHING SEGMENT SCRIPT:

I. Opening Prayer

II. Opening Exercise

- A. If you had to write down different words to describe who you are, what would you say?
- B. *Give participants a few minutes to write down a response to this prompt.*

III. Overview of Calling

- A. What comes to mind when you think about the idea of calling? (*Ask audience*).
- B. *Recap what your church has learned so far from C3 Initiative in a few sentences.*

C. Main Idea

- i. Calling is not only work we do and roles we have – it is about identity.
- ii. Calling begins with listening for our truest identity in God.
- iii. We must know and experience our identity as God’s beloved children in order to live out our callings in powerful ways.
- iv. Reflective Writing can be a tool to help get us there.

IV. Introduction to Reflective Writing

- A. Reflective writing creates space to reflect meaningfully on our lives.
- B. Reflective Writing is different than other types of writing, such as journaling or creative writing.
- C. Reflective Writing is a set apart space to intentionally reflect on the details of your life, to hear God’s voice, and to discern where God is calling you in different seasons and circumstances.
- D. Reflective Writing is not intended for an audience; it is solely for the writer, for God, and for anyone else the writers wishes to share with.
- E. Why does reflecting in this way matter?
 - i. Annie Dillard writes: “You don’t have to sit outside in the dark. If however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it.”
 - ii. You don’t have to create space in your life for reflection, and God does not demand this from you. But if you want to hear from him and want to live in deep alignment with him, you will find that this is necessary.
 - iii. We our posturing ourselves to be more receptive to God’s voice in our lives so that he can both call and convict us.
- F. **Addressing Apprehensions**
 - i. Some people here might feel nervous about this workshop. You might think you are not a “good writer.”
 - ii. I want to challenge you to lay aside preconceived notions about writing and be open to writing in a new way!

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V. Explanation of Reflective Writing using Anglican line of liturgy:

Reflective writing helps us to live out this line of Anglican liturgy.

“Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit”...

A. Reflecting Writing as *Cleansing*

- i. Reflective writing invites God to cleanse us.
- ii. It helps us work through thoughts, ideas, memories, struggles, and feelings.
- iii. When we write, we offer these things to God so the Spirit can lighten our loads and renew our perspectives.
- iv. Writing can help when we feel stuck in certain situations, unhelpful thought patterns, or overwhelming feelings.
- v. God can use our words to heal us by reforming our thoughts and feelings.
- vi. It can help to “renew our minds” (Romans 12:2).
- vii. Research shows that writing in this way actually changes the brain! We can create new and healthier neural pathways just by making space in our lives for Reflective Writing.
- viii. Often, when we write from our emotions first, we are then more able to write from a place of truth and hearing God’s voice clearly.
- ix. We can recognize our feelings as helpful because they give us information about what we need and what we are to do.
- x. However, feelings are not always the voice of God!
- xi. When we write, we can invite Jesus into our emotions so that he can bring calm and clarity that we need to reflect from a place of truth.
- xii. When we are freed our mental clutter, we have more space within ourselves to experience God’s love and to offer that loving presence to others.

B. Reflective Writing as *Communion*

- i. Reflective Writing invites God to commune with us.
- ii. It is a sacred space where we open ourselves up to receive fresh inspiration from the Holy Spirit.
- iii. We also receive deeper insight into who we are and who God is.
- iv. So, the very act of writing itself is just as significant as the writing we produce.
- v. Reflective Writing is not a performance – it’s not about “how good you are.”
- vi. The point of Reflective Writing is to experience God.
- vii. When you share your writing, you can also open up spaces for other people to encounter God in your words.

C. Reflective Writing as *Sanctifying*

- i. Reflective Writing is also sanctifying.
- ii. When we write with openness to Jesus, the Spirit can use our words to make us more holy.
- iii. We become more receptive to God’s love and the ways God is working in our lives.
- iv. The process of writing also refines us. It can feel laborious and long, because we have such short attention spans!
- v. We live in a culture that constantly distracts us with advertisements and internet webpages.
- vi. So, we end up being distracted not only from our tasks, but also from discovering our true selves.
- vii. Reflective Writing can unveil those distractions.
- viii. Reflective Writing helps us learn to sit in silence with ourselves.
- ix. With God’s help, we no longer have to run from ourselves. Instead, we can face ourselves.
- x. We can take an honest look at the places where we are growing and the places where we need to grow.
- xi. And when we do, we find that our Lord encourages us and convicts us.



D. Reflective Writing as *Slowing Down*

- i. When we enter the writing process, it forces us to slow down. As we do slow down, we start to notice things.
- ii. Reflective Writing draws our attention to the details of our own lives and helps us see the holiness in them.
Ex: (Can provide other examples here, ie mundane things like a daffodil or a coffee grinder, the smell of your mom's perfume)
- iii. Reflective Writing enables us to, in the words of George MacDonald, "(see something) very common, but with all the commonness polished off of it, and the lovely soul of it, which people so seldom see, and yet seldomer believe in, shining out."
- iv. Reflective Writing calls us to be intentional about pushing against our fast-paced culture.
- v. Reflective Writing helps us to nourish our inner lives, which changes our vision.

E. Reflective writing as *Awareness of God*

- i. Reflective writing heightens our awareness of God and expands our imagination about God.
- ii. It helps us to remember that God is not confined to Sunday morning church services, Bible studies, or anything else we would label "Christian."
- iii. God inhabits our inner being.
- iv. He inhabits the physical space around us wherever we are. All we have to do is to imagine him there.
- v. Reflective Writing helps us remember that God is involved in the details of our lives.
- vi. God cares about things that seem small and fleeting to us.
- vii. Reflective Writing frees us to imagine God's presence in unexpected places.
Ex: (Can provide other examples here - ex, pounce of your puppy, piano keys, faces of an arguing couple, brushstrokes of an oil painting.)
- viii. When we learn to see God in the world around us in this way, it opens us up to see the truth of our lives in new ways...
- ix. This leads us in to a discussion of calling.

F. Reflective Writing as *Discerning Calling*

- i. Reflective writing is giving God permission to speak into our calling – our vocational lives.
- ii. The words "vocation" and "calling" are interchangeable here.
- iii. In some denominations (like Anglicanism), "vocation" is associated with "ordination." This is not the case here. Yet the two words are connected.
- iv. The word "vocation" derives from the latin for "voice." Also, the latin word *vocare*, or "to call."
- v. So, vocation is not a goal that we pursue, but a calling that we hear.
(Repeat this twice - it is an important main idea.)
 1. That calling is the voice of God that speaks to our truest self.
 2. We hear many different voices throughout our lives – voices of culture, media, parents, friends, classmates, coworkers...you fill in the blank.
 3. These voices can tell us who we should be, how we should spend our time, and what end we should be living for.
 4. The constant influx of sensory and advertising messages makes it all the more difficult to sift through these voices and discern our own voices, and God's voice.
 5. If we don't make space for ourselves to reflect and hear God's voice, we can easily allow the voices around us to decide our calling for us.
 6. Then, we will rush into something without actually consulting God for his opinion!
 7. We need to radically shift our awareness from these evaluative voices to God's loving voice. But, how do we do that?



G. Reflective Writing as Accessing True Self

- i. Reflective Writing helps us to quiet the constant flow of input from outside ourselves so we can access the voice of our true self.
- ii. This is the self that God speaks to and through.
- iii. When we live from our true self, we have congruence between our inner and outer lives.
- iv. We do not cling or grasp for significance.
- v. We already know our identity and worth.
- vi. Our true self hears and believes God's voice: "you are my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."
- vii. Our true self knows its God-given gifts and passions.
- viii. Spiritual leader Parker Palmer talks about vocation as something that does not come from willfulness, but from listening. He says that we must "listen to our lives" and try to understand what they are truly about.
- ix. The writer Frederick Buechner has a similar idea. He writes: "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."
- x. Reflective writing helps us to shift through our most honest desires.
- xi. It helps us identify when we have felt most alive and closest to God, most at home in ourselves and in the world.
- xii. Only when we have this awareness can we start to take practical steps forward.
- xiii. Ephesians 2:10 says "(You) are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance so that (you) would walk in them."

1. The Greek word for "Workmanship" is "poema," which means "poetry" – your life is a poem that God is writing!
2. This verse shows that vocation is not something we go and get for ourselves, but is rather something that we receive from God.
3. This takes the pressure off to contrive it or to "have it figured it out."
4. Instead, vocation is an ongoing process of listening and discernment.
5. So, your job is only to listen for each word, each line, each stanza as God reveals it to you, and to walk into each task that God has for you.

H. Conclusion

- i. Psalm 1 says: "Blessed are those ... who delight in the instruction of the Lord, and on God words they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, that yield their fruit in due season. They prosper in all that they do."
 1. Reflective Writing - heightens our awareness that we already are planted in the presence of God. We only need to give ourselves the space to access God's streams of living water that are already nourishing us, growing us, and bearing fruit through our lives. Writing can be that space.
 2. Think about a tree – it can't grow itself; it cannot force itself to bear fruit.
 3. God does this work in our lives.
 4. All we need to do is allow him to, and to surrender ourselves to his timing – doing each work he calls us to in its season.
 5. Calling is less about making things happen and more about listening, surrendering, and obedience.



I. Closing Prayer

Personal prayer, and/or prayer below: Windows of the Soul, by Ken Gire

*"Help me, O God, To listen to what it is that makes my heart glad, and to follow where it leads.
May joy, not guilt, Your voice, not the voices of others, Your will, not my willfulness, Be the guides that lead me
to my vocation. Help me to unearth the passions of my heart that lay buried in my youth.
And help me to go over that ground again and again until I can hold in my hands,
Hold and treasure, Your calling on my life."*

Reflective Writing Time

Directly following the Teaching Segment, participants will enter into an hour-long time of Reflective Writing. Faith formation leaders will distribute Reflective Writing handouts to guide participants both in listening for God's voice and beginning to write. These include writing instructions, writing tips, writing prompts, relevant Scriptures, quotes, a poem, and a book list. Faith formation leaders can encourage participants to spread out in the building, go outside (weather dependent), or go wherever is most comfortable for them to write.

Large Group Reflection:

Faith formation leaders will gather participants back together for a period of large group reflection, asking the following questions:

- How many of you have done something like this before? How many of you was this new for?
- Reflect on the experience of writing. What was it like to slow down and draw out details of your life?
- How did you sense God's voice?

Faith formation leaders should make every effort to ensure that every participant who chooses to share is fully heard and not interrupted. Faith formation leaders should re-direct any interruptions back to the prompts or the person sharing in a manner that is kind but firm.

Small Group Reflection:

Faith formation leaders have participants split up into small groups of around 4 or so people. Small groups will answer the following prompts together:

- Reflect on what the writing was like for you. What surprised you? What came up in you?
- How was it listening for God's voice? What did you learn about yourself?
- Where are you right now in your own discernment of your calling? Where do you sense God leading, if at all?

Take turns sharing. If you feel so led, share some of your writing!

**Please note that these prompts will be printed out on the handouts that participants will be receiving at the beginning of the workshop. Faith formation leaders should direct participants to the handouts before dividing into small groups. Suggested time for discussion is 30-45 minutes.

Large Group Reflection:

Faith formation leaders will gather participants together once again for a final large group reflection, asking the following questions:

- What came up in your small group reflection time?
- What was it like to share with your small group and to hear from your small group members?
- Anything else anyone would like to share about the workshop?
- Questions?

Faith formation leaders will leave the last few minutes of the workshop to answer any questions participants may have about Reflective Writing, the workshop, calling, etc.

Closing Prayer

