

Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose

“This is an opportunity to discern what God will have you do next.”

As a participant in Samford University’s Life is Calling program, St. Simon Peter Episcopal Church welcomed the opportunity to discover how God was calling members to live out their faith individually as Christians and collectively as a Christian community in Pell City, Alabama. Encouraged by Kelly Rhodes Adams, project coordinator for Life is Calling, the church formed an “Imagination Committee” that asked parish members to consider such questions as: How might we discern and experience God’s call on our lives? Where is God calling us to serve? To assist St. Simon Peter Church and other participating congregations in the Samford program, Adams and her team of consultants spent the last half of 2019 creating and piloting a curriculum focused on individual calling.

“The goal was to foster and facilitate conversation that would lead individuals to a deeper understanding of calling as multi-faceted and seasonal in a way that encompasses our whole life and whole self,” she explains. “Participants were encouraged not only to think about where their ‘deep gladness meets the world’s deep need’ by considering their passions and gifts but also the season of life they’re in and how God could be calling them through the various roles of that season.” These roles might include those of employee, retiree, parent, grandparent, caregiver, mentor, friend, empty-nester, newlywed or volunteer.

To better understand God’s call on their collective faith community, the Imagination Committee at St. Simon Peter Church invited a Samford program consultant to lead a four-week series of classes. Applying the lessons that emerged from the series, members identified several new ministry possibilities. In the end, they embraced the idea of a respite program for caregivers of persons with dementia. “Their community is aging, and they’ve seen the toll that memory loss can have on families,” says Adams.

Leading a team at Samford, Adams is helping parishioners at St. Simon Peter and 15 other congregations in Alabama hear God’s call to minister outwardly—as with caregivers. But just as meaningful is the work of helping individuals discover where God is calling them. “God is calling us in many ways. We need to nurture disciplines that will help us listen and discern, and to consider our faith lives within our families and at work and school.” Adams says. “To create a culture of calling within the church, we must recognize and affirm individual calling, in its myriad forms, in ourselves and others.”



Cascading communities of learning

Samford University is one of 13 faith-based organizations that have received grants to create “innovation hubs” as part of Lilly Endowment’s \$20 million Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose Initiative. Begun in 2017 and continuing for five years, each hub is working under the guidance of an experienced leader, such as Adams, to accomplish the initiative’s central goals:

- to nurture the religious lives of Christians by helping them discover and fully experience God’s call; and
- to enhance the vitality of congregations by developing or expanding ministries that enable Christians to live out their callings in community.

Unique to the initiative is its multi-tiered organizational structure. The Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Collegeville, Minn., serves as coordinator of the program’s many moving parts and provides learning opportunities—including an annual conference—for hub leaders. These leaders, in turn, create learning opportunities for up to 24 congregational teams that make up the individual hubs. Retreats, webinars, Zoom sessions and dedicated Facebook pages are among the educational activities and resources available to the churches through the hubs. The coordination program also gathers hub teams for learning opportunities focused on innovation and evaluation. Each participating congregation is

creating a project and can apply for a grant of up to \$30,000 to launch or expand a ministry that supports the initiative's intent.

"This truly is an experiment," says Kathleen Cahalan, director of the coordination program. "Lilly Endowment has a long commitment to exploring vocation and calling in the Christian life, and much of the past work has focused on young adults through college campus programs. Now the Endowment is extending those efforts to larger audiences—people in congregations, their pastors and other leaders—and using these innovation hubs as a strategy for reaching them."

The experiment is not without its challenges, but hub leaders have embraced the concept and anticipate positive results. "We're helping Christians grasp two important themes," explains Nancy Going, program director of the C3 hub (Creating a Culture of Calling) and executive director of Vibrant Faith. "First, we Christians don't have just one calling; God calls us to do multiple things. Second, these callings likely change throughout our lifetimes."

A variety of approaches

An early decision that each hub had to make was determining its criteria for selecting participating congregations. The Endowment didn't prescribe a process, only urged hubs to be innovative in their designs. As a result, the Samford hub chose to limit applicants to Alabama churches but sought diversity in size, member demographics and faith tradition. Virginia Theological Seminary's hub opted to work



within the Episcopal denomination. The hub run by the American Baptist College reached out to African American congregations and aimed its first year of programming specifically to pastors rather than laity. Vibrant Faith recruited "congregations we thought could handle an initiative like this and weren't so involved in a crisis that they couldn't move forward," says Going.

Among the most ecumenical hubs is the Communities of Calling Initiative based at the Collegeville Institute. Its congregational teams represent churches from multiple denominations located in urban and

■ A mural (opposite) reflecting the work of vocational discernment projects with congregations across the country was a focal point for participants of a 2019 gathering of project leaders in Indianapolis (above, below).





rural settings in 10 states and Canada. The cohort gathered together for the first time in fall 2018 to begin reflecting on their experiences of calling, as individuals and as members of congregational teams.

“We brought the teams together in a retreat setting,” recalls project director Laura Kelly Fanucci. “We wanted to give them time and space to connect with each other and begin to wrestle with questions of calling. It was interesting to have a Free Methodist pastor and an Orthodox priest who rarely end up in the same room, finding common ground around practices related to calling. It’s been beautiful to see their openness to learn about this issue from each other.”

Because of the diverse needs and contexts of hub members leaders have been flexible in tailoring learning experiences appropriate to their congregations. As the initiative has unfolded, plans have been tweaked, pacing has been adjusted and new resources have been explored in response to the groups’ needs. Pastors, in particular, have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to take a break from the busyness of day-to-day ministry, dispense with tight deadlines and consider where their churches are going in the next several years. “This is not a prepackaged program,” says Adams. “Participants have the freedom to pause and ask, ‘In our unique context and in this moment of time, where is God calling us as individuals and as a congregation?’ ”

The power of cross-fertilization

Two years into the initiative, the chemistry within the hubs and among the congregations is palpable. Teams take it upon themselves to visit each other’s worship services, share resources and propose joint gatherings apart from formally scheduled events. When Vibrant Faith hub leaders offered to teach a workshop on coaching strategies, the Collegeville hub agreed to host the sessions, and representatives from 10 of the 13 hubs attended the training. When the hub located at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference slated its annual conference for Birmingham, Ala., the leaders reached out to the nearby hubs at Samford University and American Baptist College and suggested they gather for a pre-conference workshop. “We talked about issues facing

our churches, especially from the standpoint of social and racial justice,” says Adams. “It was transformative for our participants.”

At December’s annual meeting in Indianapolis, hub leaders engaged in “cross-fertilization”—their term for swapping ideas about ways to respond to the challenges they face. Most leaders are at the point in the initiative where they are receiving grant proposals that detail each congregation’s plan to launch or expand a ministry. With the help of the annual meeting’s attendees, facilitator Steven Tomlinson compiled a list of likely obstacles that could impede the success of some proposals. These obstacles included a lack creativity; fatigue among volunteers; fear of failure; conflict within a team; and the tug between innovation and tradition.

A common dilemma that many hub leaders reported was the tendency of congregations to request grant support for ministries that are worthy of implementation but are unrelated to the intent of the initiative.

“Discernment is about listening to the still, small voice that takes Christians to a deeper place,” Tomlinson reminded them. “This initiative gives congregations an opportunity to discern what God will have them do next.”

Fast forward five years

Evaluation is a key component of all Endowment programs, and hub leaders already are gathering information about the lessons learned from the Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose Initiative. Hub leaders agree that at the end of the initiative’s five-year span, they want the legacy to be more than the establishment or growth of several congregational ministries. They hope conversations about discernment will be ongoing, and the concept of discipleship will have fresh meaning for individual Christians and for entire communities of faith.

“We typically think of churches as places that don’t want to try new things,” says Adams. “But I’ve been surprised at the number of congregations that said, ‘Sign us up!’ when they heard about this initiative. For me, success will be less about the projects that they propose and more about their willingness to experiment and to look for new ways to be a neighbor to their immediate communities. They’re learning a process of discernment that is tailored to their congregations and that will help them in the future to discern where God is calling them to serve.”

■ Phyllis D.K. Hildreth (above), who directs the Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose Initiative at American Baptist College in Nashville, Tenn., took part in the 2019 gathering in Indianapolis.