**Sample Module**

**Reading**

Will Campbell, “Vocation as Grace,” in *Callings!*, ed. James Y. Holloway and Will D. Campbell (New York: Paulist, 1974), 279-80.

**About the Author**

Will D. Campbell (1924-2013) was born in Mississippi, the son of a farmers. He was ordained as a minister at age 17 by his local Baptist congregation. After serving in the Army during World War II as a medic, he attended Wake Forest College (BA, English, 1948), Tulane University, and Yale Divinity School (B.D., 1952).

Though he held a pastorate in Louisiana from 1952 to 1954, Campbell spent most of his career in other settings. He took a position as a field officer for the National Council of Churches in 1957, which began a life-long time of courageous, public engagement with the Civil Rights Movement. In 1963, Campbell left the NCC to become director of the Committee of Southern Churchmen, which was his base for continuing activism.

Though he remained an activist for his entire life, he was seldom at home in institutions of any kind. He devoted increasing amounts of time to his writing, and for most of his life he lived with his wife and family in a remote location on a farm near Nashville, Tennessee. He wrote scores of essays, delivered many sermons and lectures across the US, and authored a number of novels. His best known novel, *Brother to a Dragonfly* (1977), combined autobiography with an elegy for his brother and a history of the Civil Rights movement.

He once said, "anyone who is not as concerned with the immortal soul of the dispossessor as he is with the suffering of the dispossessed is being something less than Christian."  He was as cantankerous as he was charitable, and he offended as many liberals as conservatives. Thus, for example, he was as strongly opposed to abortion as he was to capital punishment and war.

**Commentary**

Campbell tells us that the story he relates was set at a time before he began his own long process of vocational discernment. And for a time it looks as though this is a story about someone who was called to be a trapeze artist. But as the story unfolds, it seems to be more a story of a family group than of an individual, more a story of a kind of collective calling and less a story of an individual one.

The trapeze family troupe can be taken as an image of any community of people made up of those who have a sense of both personal and communal callings. Thus, the story might be understood as a metaphor for congregational life.

**Discussion Questions**

Start your discussion by having someone read the story aloud.

The trapeze artist begins by telling Campbell all of the reasons he feels called to be a trapeze artist to earn a living. What are these motives and reasons, and how to they compare to the motives and reasons that led you to do the work you do? Do you regard that work as a calling?

There are many ways to think about the purpose of a congregation. Here are three of them:

1. A congregation is a place that calls, equips, and strengthens people in their faith in order to send them out individually into the world to serve others.
2. A congregation is a place that strengthens the faith of its members in order to enable them *collectively* (through joint congregational projects) to serve their wider communities.
3. A congregation is a place that provides its members with mutual support and aid in order to heal their wounds and protect them from spiritual adversity.

Which of these three descriptions of a congregation most closely resembles the description of the family trapeze troupe?

You may decide that descriptions a) through c) above all apply to some extent to your congregation. But where is your present emphasis: in caring for one another or caring for the world? Do you think you have found the right balance?

The family described in Campbell’s story would seem to be in many ways dysfunctional. Is your congregation more a dysfunctional Christian family in search of healing or a functional Christian family in search of mission?