

Report from Fuller Seminary

In reflecting on Fuller Seminary's CLMPI (Creating Lives of Meaning and Purpose) grant, we have been learning something important about the nature of vocation.

Our original purpose for the grant was to teach congregations and their leaders to *find* a congregational vocation and to develop creative ways to express that vocation — and we called that innovation. But we realize now that we had a naively-static understanding of “finding vocation” because we had a naively-static view of the world.

This realization has caused us to shift our work to focus far more on “**vocational agility**” — i.e. the ability for a congregation or its leaders to express or even adjust their vocation in light of major changes in the world around them. Vocational agility was once a minor theme in our work (e.g. we at Fuller have been talking about vocational agility, teaching about it, and writing about it since at least 2014), but it has lately become much more of a major theme.

Indeed, in the future, when we evaluate and describe our grant, we will be discussing vocational agility as a significant part of what we mean by calling and vocation. Let me explain where we have been and then describe where we are going.

When we created the grant, we assumed that if a congregation could find its place in the world, we could teach them how to thrive in it. And we thought that the hard part of the task was getting a congregation to find its calling. It did not originally occur to us to consider that a congregation's basic assumptions about the world could change just in the span of time we worked with them on the grant.

Let me be more specific. The first stage of our grant involved hosting “innovation summits” (one in California and two sponsored by the Reformed Church in America and held in their denominational offices). And this first stage was fairly straight-forward. Indeed, some aspects of those first projects worked (e.g. We found that getting diverse teams from diverse congregations in the same room enabled much more creativity and that creating prototypes to take back with them gave them something specific to focus their energies). And some aspects did not work (e.g. We underestimated the need for coaches who can coax congregations to remain focused on implementing those prototype projects; almost every project that failed did so because the congregational leaders got distracted by other things).

And we looked with anticipation to creating Stage Two summits. Of course, the pandemic scuttled that plan. We have twice now had bishops cancel scheduled summits at the last minute after we had already trained the congregational leaders who were supposed to attend that summit (one in March 2020 in Southern California and one in October 2021 in North Carolina). Each time the problem was that COVID fears prevented us from having an in-person gathering.

But even as the pandemic closed some doors, it has opened others. Or, to put another way, **the pandemic changed our plans, but it also changed our view of vocation.**

Even as we have not had many in-person gatherings of congregational leaders, there has been a tremendous openness to hosting gatherings that discuss **what congregational vocation looks like during and after the pandemic.** For example, in just the last few weeks, I did a day-long gathering of one hundred SDA clergy in Portland, I did (over Zoom) an half-day event for a hundred UMC clergy in Northern Virginia, I did a series of four online events for ELCA clergy in North Carolina, and (through our sister program at Samford University), I did an all-day event with seventy-five clergy in Alabama. I did similar events throughout the summer and have more scheduled.

And listening to those clergy and their church leaders has shifted the way that our project talks about vocation. I now emphasize this idea of vocational agility. Church leaders are now far more open to the idea that the calling of their congregation will likely need to evolve in response to the needs of the world around them. For example, the two biggest issues that most leaders are presently discussing are (a) the pandemic (and especially the fatigue it creates), and (b) the fractious divide the political debate is creating (and especially the latent anger it creates — anger that spreads to congregational conversations). The leaders are no longer as comfortable talking about finding a static vocation. They are far more interested in **how to become agile enough to help their congregations to thrive in the midst of not just this change, but whatever change is over the next unforeseen hill.**

So that has subtly changed the work that we are doing for the grant. For example, we have, in the past created all sorts of resources on vocation (at last count we had something like two dozen such resources available to churches). But the reusable learning objects (RLOs) we are presently creating (you will recall that we call them RLOs because we try to ensure that any resource we create can be used in multiple contexts — i.e. in training our congregations, in speaking to clergy groups, in podcast interviews, and even in classes) tend to focus on vocational agility.

The response so far has been gratifying. For example, after the recent Lilly-sponsored gathering at Samford, the feedback said that this was one of the best events that their center had ever hosted. And I think the shift away from a static view of vocation and toward vocational agility was a big part of it.

Let me conclude by telling you where I think this takes us into the future

1. We will surely schedule more innovation summits once the pandemic eases. We already have two on the horizon. But we will re-write the training that we do for those summits to emphasize the discovery and ongoing re-discovery of vocation.
2. We will continue to create resources on vocation, but they will now include explicit discussions of vocational agility. For example, this summer we created a series of model sermons on vocation that allow pastors to imagine how they can incorporate discussions of vocation into their regular sermon series. This is a way to ensure that vocation is tied to the daily lives of their congregants.
3. We have added a new little project to our repertoire. I keep hearing from clergy that “seminary did not prepare me for this.” So, I have received permission from my dean to work with a group of Fuller professors to make vocationally agility a part of each of their courses. I do not anticipate that this will be a large part of our grant’s work, which will continue to focus on congregations. But it seems worthwhile to take the short step necessary to leverage the work we are already doing in order to change the way that clergy construct their understanding of congregational vocation.

Ultimately, **this whole grant project is an exercise in vocational agility.** When we began, we knew what we meant by vocation and we had a plan for how we wanted congregations to discover and implement that vocation. With our experience of the pandemic, both our understanding of vocation and our plans have had to adapt. We need to have the same agility that we want to instill in our congregations and their leaders.

Report on Hub Activities:

We have met been invited to speak to many groups of congregational leaders and clergy over the last few months specifically about how to respond to the pandemic. The focus of these sessions and conferences have been on how congregations and congregational leaders can develop agility in light of the pandemic and any other change that might be coming. These speaking engagements included:

- a day-long gathering of one hundred SDA clergy in Portland,
- a half-day (via Zoom) event for a hundred UMC clergy in Northern Virginia,
- a series of four online events for 40-95 ELCA clergy in North Carolina, and
- (through our sister program at Samford University), an all-day event with seventy-five clergy in Alabama.

You ask about the largest point of discernment. It is how to pivot to focus on vocational agility. The innovation summits are designed to help a congregation take one next step – and along the way we teach them a skill that they can replicate. We need to re-adjust the summits so that we emphasize not only the outcome of the summit (the innovative next step) but also the process of the summit. We need to make sure that congregational leaders see that process as a way of learning to develop agility.

Report on Congregational Activities:

Perhaps the best way to give you a glimpse of our work is to provide an abbreviated version of the speech that I have been giving to congregations and congregational leaders as we talk about the implications of the pandemic. It shows, in the words of the assignment, “how a vocational lens can serve congregational life.”

I am tired, and so are you. These last twenty months have taken its toll on all of us. I want to explain a bit about why it is so hard and then say something about how that changes the way that we can see the callings that God places on our congregations.

About six weeks into the pandemic – in April 2020 – I was talking with a pastor who has been a mentor for me. We think of this pandemic as a crisis, he said, but it is not really one crisis; it is four crises. There is the **medical crisis**, yes, but we also are experiencing an **economic crisis** (everyone’s job has been affected by the pandemic), a **political crisis** (no matter what your political persuasion, you see the crisis), and a **racial crisis** (as the injustices that have simmered so long are bubbling to the surface). Four crises.

And I want to offer you a very California metaphor. Have you ever been swimming at the beach? The swells come in sets. The wave comes and gently lifts you up and then gently sets you down. Then there is a little break and another one comes along. Up and down. Waves can be great fun when they are predictable—you can even ride the waves—when you can see them coming and you can prepare for them.

But the last twenty months have not been predictable. The four crises together mean that waves are coming from every direction at once. It’s more like white-water rafting. You don’t know what is around the bend or past that big rock. And the first time you see a wave may be when it smacks you in the head.

As one scholar put it, we live in a time of permanent white-water. The world is not predictable; we cannot see what is coming. And, in such a world, we need to develop agility.

What does that look like for a congregation? Let’s start with a basic question. What is your congregation’s calling before God? It used to be that we would think of calling as something static. You discovered (or picked) your congregation’s calling and then that was the calling you pursued for years and years to come. Some congregations, for example, reach out to college students and some, say, might have a strong recovery ministry. The old static model was that you picked a vocation and you stuck with it.

But I want to suggest to you that you will need to learn to practice vocational agility. Let me explain what I mean. Let's start by looking at what we mean by vocation and then show how, in a world of permanent white-water, our definition of vocation demands that we cultivate agility.

Our vocation begins with the calling of God. God calls each of us, first, to discipleship – to a relationship of fruitful love with God. But, a second call comes hard on its heels. It is the call to love our neighbors. What we call vocation is defined first and foremost by the call to love other people.

Let me put it this way. Christian leaders (and Christian churches) don't have followers. Jesus has followers. But we do not. Instead, we have people entrusted to our care. These people belong to Jesus and not to us.

And that changes how we see the Christian practice of vocation. I am not called to a project or a purpose or by a passion. I am called to a people. Your congregation's calling is defined by the people entrusted to your care. And we all know that the people entrusted to our care encompasses much more than the souls that show up on a Sunday morning. We bear a larger responsibility. We are called to love our neighbors.

And now we can see how this world of permanent white-water – this unpredictable world that brought Four Crises in the last twenty months – now we can see how this world demands vocational agility.

If your congregation's calling is about your purposes, your plans, and your passions – then you can have a static and unchanging view of your call. But your congregation's vocation is not about your purposes, your plans, and your passions; it is about your people – the people that God has entrusted to your care.

And the needs of your people keep changing in this white-water world. And our calling is to make spiritual sense of the ever-changing needs of the people entrusted to our care. Your congregation's calling during the pandemic was likely quite different than its calling before the pandemic. And it is so tempting to believe the lie that when things go back to "normal," we can return church to the way it once was.

Your church will never be the same because the needs of your people will never be the same.

<And then I preview for them the next few hours where we work to develop the skills that vocational agility requires>

That is how a vocational lens has helped us serve congregations in the last few months.