

## Niche Ministry: Fostering Youthful Leaders for the Now and Future Church

Dori Baker, Ph.D.

*The students did seem to desire something deeper, something more idealistic, something different from what they were told constituted success American style. But awakening an exiled shadow government of compassion and idealism is risky business.<sup>1</sup>*

During a Sunday morning worship service last month, a United Methodist pastor called forward eight robed students who were graduating from high school later that day. Giving each graduate a moment to shine, the pastor introduced the student, said a few words about their accomplishments, and asked about their future plans. The third student's name was Mark. The pastor indicated that the congregation was especially proud of Mark, who had graduated fourth in his class. Mark stated that he would be going to a nearby state university the following year to study physical therapy.

"Physical therapy," The pastor exclaimed. "Why, you could be a doctor!" The pastor moved on to the next graduate.

The friend who told me this story was troubled. Her husband is undergoing treatment for prostate cancer. "If all the gifted students become doctors," she said, "What a sorry lot of nurses, physical therapists, and x-ray technicians we'll end up with." Highly aware of the need for many areas of specialization within the field of medicine, she was disappointed in her pastor for supporting a consumer-driven model of vocational discernment which seemed to place money and status above an appropriate response to one's particular gifts and calling.

I begin with this anecdote because it made me cringe. It called to mind the "ecology of leadership formation" as I've participated in it.

This paper is organized around a paradox I encounter in the field of Christian Education. I begin with a confession around this paradox and the ways I have mentored within it. From there, I reflect on interviews with youthful leaders whose vocational trajectories my work has intersected. These interviews allow me to sketch an impression of the pathways a few souls have recently traversed within our ecology of leadership formation. Their stories may call to mind our own journeys and help us see the changing landscape. **The goal of this paper is to stimulate conversation that will move us toward incarnating a robust ecology in which gifted people find support in discerning and answering their calls into interesting and necessary niches for ministry.** These niches, I hope, might offer fulfilling places from which young people can embark on life-long journeys of leading others in a Holy life marked by inner transformations that, in turn, transform the world (i.e. Christian Education).

### Acknowledging a Hierarchy in Our Ecology

The template of the pastor's conversation with Mark felt vaguely familiar to me. In one moment, the pastor had both affirmed Mark's gifts *and* subtly (but rather publicly) questioned his vocational discernment toward a particular niche in the vast field of medical careers. The comment belied a hidden hierarchy, a pre-conceived "peak experience" to which all people who graduate high in their class and rank well in their SATs *should* aspire. Of course, the pastor seemed to imply, if you are smart enough to be

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Mahan, *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition*, 30.

a doctor and garner the status and wealth associated with that career – then surely, you must! Success American-style demands it!

As an ordained elder with a passion for the educational ministry of the church, I recognized in this pastor's gaffe a moment in my own seminary teaching ministry. I remember -- in the midst of the confusing change of ordination's meaning and nomenclature -- counseling an extremely gifted, articulate, bright female student who was called to educational ministry, pursuing the order of deacon, and adverse to the itinerant system to consider re-visiting her decision. "Why not ALSO consider your gifts for word, sacrament, and order?" the feminist in me whispered, resisting the urge to shout. It was as if I had said "Why, you could be an elder!" -- revealing a similar hidden hierarchy, a pre-conceived "peak experience" to which all people who are called to church leadership and are particularly gifted should aspire. Of course, my comment implied, if you are good enough to be an ordained elder and to garner whatever status may still be associated with that chosen career -- you must! Success American-style demands it!

This impression of hierarchy doesn't exist in my head alone. I venture to say we all live with it – sometimes supporting it, but hopefully more frequently chipping away at it through our good work in the educational ministries of the church. As a person who was introduced to the life of the church as a late-teenager, I confess to a particular cluster of images around the words "Christian Education" that cling, regardless of my efforts to resist them.

Despite the fact that I volunteer as a Sunday School teacher, head my church's Vacation Bible School, organize my community's ecumenical children's ministry, and work part-time as a professor of youth ministry, I dis-associate on anything but an academic level from the words "Christian Education." At a feeling-level, the two words bring to mind the dusty closet at the end of the children's wing – filled with decaying posters depicting the life of Jesus, stacks of unused film strip projectors and other out-dated technology, such as 33-rpm record players. Although in reality, the heyday of these icons of Christian Education pre-date my becoming a Christian, those items still exist in a very messy closet at the church I attend. And, I believe, so do the lingering images of Christian Education that come from our historical link to schooling models and a church hierarchy that prioritizes those who serve sacraments and itinerate.

When asked recently whether I could ever encourage one of my daughters to be a Christian Educator, I was caught off-guard. My honest answer: no. If the question had been worded to point more directly to the arts of ministry involving spiritual formation, spiritual direction, retreat leadership, biblical interpretation, ritual formation, or small group nurture, I wouldn't have hesitated. My honest answer: I'd be delighted! I wonder if I am alone in this paradoxical relationship to the field I love.

### **Recruitment as Experienced from the Bottom-Up**

Recruiting people to a career and a calling about whose long-term viability we have severe concerns is ethically risky. This seems especially salient if the person we are mentoring or recruiting is under 30 – seeking a first career, rather than zeroing in on a second or third career later in life.

On one hand, my instinct to inspire my student toward elder's orders functioned to support rather than dismantle the hierarchy. On the other hand it was purely a professor giving a student practical professional advice. Go for the widest-possible marketable

package. Go for a job with benefits. Go for a career with long-term sustainability. Let's face it, our denomination is in flux. The only real way to be assured of a job in this sometimes theologically inconsistent world is to have the power vested in you to baptize and serve communion. Concern about the low-status and low-pay of jobs traditionally deemed women's work add an additional layer of ethical angst to the mix for me.<sup>2</sup>

It is with this ethical dilemma in mind that I decided to check in on some of my former students. I contacted 20 young leaders from seven annual conferences. All were recruited into their ministries while under the age of 30, and most of them are still in their late 20's or early 30's. I started with former students who stood out in my memory as extremely well-suited for the vocational niches they were pursuing. Most were members of youth ministry courses I have taught over the past five years at Garrett, Wesley, Methesco, and Union-PSCE. Others are colleagues of former students. One is a former member of my youth group who followed a high school attraction to leadership through college and into young adulthood.

They fall into several categories of educational leadership. Some are lay people practicing other professions who engage in disciplined, regular volunteer leadership in their churches. Some are lay people seeking or holding professional certification as a youth minister or Christian educator. Some hold a master's degrees in religious education and are pursuing or hold deacon's orders. Some hold or are pursuing a master's degree in divinity and have an affinity for the ministries of teaching and learning. A few hold dual degrees. All of them are educators: all of them are working in churches, part-time or full-time, mostly paid.

I focused my interview around their recruitment, mentoring, and calling into ministries of educational leadership. I was looking for stories that might point to the very recent history of the functioning of our leadership recruitment – not from the top-down as it was planned and carried out ministers, professors, boards, and agencies – but from the bottom-up as it was received and put into action by people pursuing a career and a calling over the past decade. For those who did not pursue elder's orders, I was particularly interested in how the hierarchy may have affected them during mentor/mentee relations within the church. I wondered if their parents, teachers, and other trusted guides had tried to counsel them away from their chosen niche to other more financially rewarding or secure locations of ministry.

I offer these reflections from an admittedly small sample with the hope that they might help us recall our own trajectories of recruitment into educational leadership, help us mark where change may have occurred since the "glory days", and help us envision a robust and diverse ecology of leadership for our future church. **After identifying three significant locations in which the young leaders experienced "epiphanies of recruitment" I will cite a few of the gaps, pitfalls, and chasms they encountered in attempting to en flesh their callings. I will conclude by returning to the context of consumer culture** – Mark in front of his congregation being advised good-heartedly to go for the gold. I will argue that the pastor was living out of a pervasive curriculum of

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<sup>2</sup> In Northern Virginia, one student, who attends a large suburban church, told me the youth in her church *almost never* see a man in leadership on a Sunday morning, as their entire, multi-member staff is made up of women. With this in mind, I have recently become concerned about what this means for the future viability of recruiting *men* into leadership roles in the church.

vocation that guides dominant culture. I will advocate for an alternative curriculum of vocation that the church is particularly called to voice to the culture in which it swims.

### **Locating the Epiphany of Recruitment**

In his helpful book *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: The Ethics of Ambition*, Brian Mahan coins the term “epiphany of recruitment” to point to those inchoate moments of call which are either pursued passionately or allowed to be forgotten and swept away in pursuit of “success American style.” These “epiphanies of recruitment,” Mahan theorizes, are moments when the veil of consumption and materialism that seem to define reality are lifted.<sup>3</sup> A person glimpses a cohering purpose in life – Buechner’s image of the joining one’s deep gladness with the world’s deep needs.

The young church educators I interviewed could easily identify these moments in their lives. Their reflections clustered around **mentoring relationships, opportunities for soulful reflection, early successful ventures in leadership, and part-time work in youth ministry that functioned loosely as an apprenticeship.**

Key relationships with **mentors** (parents, youth group leaders, district youth coordinators, college chaplains) was the most-mentioned avenue of recruitment. Not surprisingly, college chaplains figured prominently as ones who had invited the emerging self into a wider arena of participation, gently nudging shy or reluctant souls into the first steps of naming and claiming their leadership potential.<sup>4</sup> As Maureen, age 30, testifies:

My college chaplain was my earliest mentor. He said he knew there was something in me I needed to say. I would never have preached that first sermon without his encouragement and invitation. I wouldn’t have gone on to be a bible study leader, covenant group leader, mission work team leader and retreat leader if I hadn’t preached that first sermon. I would probably still be in retail management.

For some of the people I interviewed, like Maureen, it was the direct request from a trusted mentor to take part in leadership that instilled belief in oneself. For others, such steps into explicit leadership were the natural outgrowth of spiritual formation, intentionally guided by the mentor. Teresa, age 26, shared:

My college chaplain nurtured my deep spirituality and allowed it to grow into explicitly Christian faith through practice, perseverance, love, encouragement ... She treated me like the person I would one day begin to become.

Similar to Teresa’s experience, others cited receiving deep spiritual nurture and **opportunities for soulful reflection** around vocational discernment as critical to their ability to accept their call toward leadership. “I had the opportunity to have a solo retreat at a convent. This really confirmed the

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<sup>3</sup> Mahan, 30-32.

<sup>4</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2000), 63.

leadership call I had experienced through high school and early college,” said Pam, 25.

High school youth group leaders and conference youth coordinators were also cited as important in calling forth leadership potential. Here, the connection to a mentoring guarantor and mentoring peer group was supported by an **early successful venture** in planning and implementing a gathering for one’s peers. Jack, 26, a high school history teacher who volunteers as a youth pastor at his church, shares the confluence of factors that called him forth:

My local church youth group fostered leadership in me by giving me confidence, something I was not finding in any of my peer groups at school. But what really identified me as a leader was helping to plan a conference-wide youth event and watching many of my ideas for the small groups come to fruition. There is personal reward in having 500 of your peers doing something that you created and worked on. It was a total success. I still remember that weekend.

For Jack, the continued influence of a college Wesley Foundation, whose pastor early-on identified him as a “freshman anomaly” because of his leadership capacity, was key. This support allowed his repertoire of skills and commitment to his role as a lay person to grow steadily through college, rather than fall away after a strong youth group experience.

The biggest surprise for me in these conversations was the way our denomination’s plethora of part-time, low-skill-level **youth worker positions** function to recruit life-long leaders. Almost every one of the persons I interviewed found their “epiphany of recruitment” supported and encouraged through a part-time position as a youth minister in the formative years during or immediately following college, no matter what form their current ministry takes. These positions sometimes function as apprenticeships in which one can try on the various role that cluster around the titles of pastor and educator. Preaching, teaching, leading small groups, planning mission trips, and engaging in one-on-one mentoring offers a freeing opportunity to try, fail, succeed, and move on. The people I interviewed found a particular flexibility from the categorization of lay/clergy and deacon/elder in this temporary moment that lends itself to rich exploration of the various niches that ministry holds. Occasionally, young people find trusted senior church staff members willing to mentor their work over the course of their brief stay.

However, as often as not, the apprenticeship functions despite the absence of hands-on supervision. In my mind, this argues in favor of efforts (such as the certification procedures) to engage these youthful practitioners in high-quality, affordable theological education as close as possible to their ministry locations. It also supports efforts launched by seminaries and/or annual conferences to intentionally mentor, recruit, and nurture this part-time labor pool, providing opportunities for naming and celebrating the internal gratification this kind of work can offer. Otherwise, a key opportunity for recruiting life-long educational leaders (lay and clergy, paid and volunteer) is lost. Graduate school in a “real”

profession beckons. Marginalization of church work into the fringes of one's life priorities beckons as well. Also lost is an opportunity to create youth ministers with an ethos that is distinctly United Methodist (as opposed to generic models packaged by commercial youth ministry ventures).

None of the people I interviewed happened to have named participation in one of the Lilly Endowment sponsored programs for high school youth. Because of the emphasis in many of these programs on mentoring communities, opportunities for soulful reflection on vocational call, and regular exposure to planning and leading structured worship events, I expect them to bear significant fruit in recruiting educational leadership for the church.<sup>5</sup> A study I am undertaking this fall specifically seeks to understand the influence of Candler's Youth Theological Initiative on the vocational journeys of its early alums, who would now be in their late-20s.

### **Hindrances to Enfleshing the Epiphany of Recruitment**

Obviously, interviewing young leaders engaged in the life of the church would turn up stories of successful flourishing. These stories indeed reflect a diverse and robust ecology creating multiple pathways for young people to receive and follow their epiphanies of recruitment. However, my collaborators were able to point to significant gaps in the journey – chasms where a rickety suspension bridge connecting two cliffs was all that kept them from choosing an alternative vocation.

**Lack of parental blessing, pastors reluctant to bless educational ministry, sexist attitudes operative within church hierarchies, and the marginalized status of church in contemporary U.S. culture were hindrances to enfleshing their calls to ministry.**

Many **parents are reluctant to bless a career in ministry**, especially one in educational ministry. Amy's story deserves lengthy retelling because it touches on several of these hindrances.

Amy's earliest call to leadership came from her high school gym teacher. After his support buffeted her confidence, she entered leadership roles in the church, creating a liturgical dance group that traveled across her state, speaking to the congregation during youth Sundays, and becoming involved in conference youth events. "But at no time ever did anyone – a pastor or Christian educator ever say, 'Hey, you should think about going into ministry.' That was never mentioned to me."

Her father, who was not a part of the church, was encouraging her to be an architect. In her work with youth who are leading at district and conference levels, Amy sees youth engaging in struggle that is heightened by the lack of parents' blessing their potential call into vocations of ministry. "There is a huge struggle between the way they are being led and what their parents want for them. Parents are thinking about the financial well-being of their children. I see parents saying, you can't do this. It will detract from academics. It will detract from sports."

In Amy's case, it was a college religion professor who opened a love for biblical languages that eventually led her to major in biblical studies at the undergraduate level. Without any training as a youth pastor, she took a part-time job. This year, at the age of 29, she celebrated 10 years in ministry. She received certification as a youth minister, but

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<sup>5</sup> Carol E. Lytch, "Summary Report of Lilly Endowment Grant Programs," 2005.

does not plan to pursue graduate work, deacon's orders or elder's orders at this time. As she reflected back on her recruitment into ministry, she pointed out numerous hindrances:

My first four years in full time youth ministry, I just didn't know what I was doing. My heart was in the right place. At the time, I didn't know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God had called me to do this. No one was giving me any support.

These experiences inspire her current actions as a conference staff member toward supporting and retaining youth ministers. She is especially concerned with trying to hold churches accountable to good employment practices with youth ministers who have very little job security and in providing high-quality retreats that offer on-the-job training and support.

In her view, **ministers of local congregations seem reluctant to encourage the best and brightest to pursue careers in educational ministries.** "Numerous pastors told me I was too bright to stay put here, with a certification in youth ministry and a good job. I have been continually encouraged to pursue elder's orders, even though my interests lie here, in building and supporting strong congregations that affirm their youth," said Amy. Amy's comments beautifully articulate a calling to niche ministry and the difficulty of staying true to such a calling.

A long history of **sexism inheres in a system** and wiggles itself out in interesting ways. The same concern that motivated me (and perhaps the pastors in Amy's life) to encourage bright women to hedge their bets by seeking elder's orders, even if educational ministry was central to their calling, threatened to obstruct the vocational journey of one man I interviewed. Jay said "My pastor strongly discouraged me from educational ministry. I was pretty blatantly told that it was not a status job, especially for a man." Luckily, Jay's father, who was suffering end-stage cancer at the time, was able to bless Jay's vocational decision at a key moment. "When I told him that I had decided to be a professional church educator, my dad just smiled and said "Well, son, isn't that what you always wanted to be?"

A final hindrance cited by my interviewees looms large. **Church work is deemed marginal** to more worthy pursuits. Investigation of this theme will focus the rest of this paper.

### **The De Facto Religion of Our Consumer Culture**

In the larger culture within which our ecology of leadership formation exists, avidly pursuing a sport goes unquestioned, while pouring one's passion into the work of the church is often seen as beneficial only as it translates into social capital that might show up on a college application or as a useful skill in an acceptable profession. This is not an opportunity to bemoan our culture, rather it is an opportunity to confess the failure of the church to translate its passionate *raison d'être* to the world at large.

One woman described her busy week as a college sophomore. She juggled her coursework with organizing Bible studies, leading a covenant group, planning retreats, and preaching during a midweek worship service. "I understood all of these things to be extra-curricular, something I did in my spare time while I prepared for my real work in the world," Maureen said. "In fact, these were moment of discovery and growth,

opportunities for the development of God-given gifts that I would be asked to use later in my journey.”

Amy described a teenager’s struggle to answer a call to become the president of her conference youth ministry. “Alice was the star pitcher of her softball team. Everyone knew Alice. She caught all kinds of flak from her coaches for consistently missing practices and games to lead church events. Finally she quit the team. She had to say to her parents, ‘You know, I feel a call to ministry. This is where my future lies.’ Very few kids could make that decision.”

This view of the life of faith operating outside the perimeter of the “real world” is a crucial issue facing us in the task of reviving faith communities and raising up new generations to lead them. In his recent empirical study “Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers,” the sociologist of religion Christian Smith pointedly depicts a culture in which church operates as one line-item on a young person’s life-resume. News accounts surrounding the release of this book earlier this year optimistically reported the study’s findings that today’s U.S. teens are “engaged in conventional religious traditions and communities and are not caught up in the much-discussed phenomenon of spiritual seeking.”

Lurking within the phrase “conventional religious traditions” however, was an almost-sinister description of what that conventional belief looks like, as reflected in the lives of today’s teens and their parents. Smith coins the not-so-catchy nickname “moralistic therapeutic deism” to depict a culture-wide withering of faith from a life-giving support undergirding one’s work and purpose in the world to one-more-time-commitment in a string of morally laudable commodities that add up to a worthy life.<sup>6</sup>

He goes on to describe this “de facto dominant religion” as portraying a God that is “something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.” The end result is a watered-down, passion-less religion that bears little resemblance to depictions of Jesus gleaned from the gospels or interpreted through church history and tradition.<sup>7</sup> Smith doesn’t blame this theology on teens – but sees it as a reflection of the faith of their church-going parents. In summarizing this alarming finding, he writes “Christianity is being secularized. Rather more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself, or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.”<sup>8</sup> This faith espouses a distinctly non-Christian belief that good people go to heaven and service to others is a means of feeling good about oneself.

Religion that transforms individual lives and equips people to transform the world through alleviating poverty, advocating for peace, re-imagining urban landscapes, and fostering global compassion towards all humanity and creation is hard to discern on Smith’s radar. In the absence of religion that makes a difference in the world, recruiting

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<sup>6</sup> Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul-Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 2005),

<sup>7</sup> Much of Smith’s concern around the effects of moralistic therapeutic deism is constructively addressed as Kenda Creasy Dean argues for reconnecting youth ministry to its referent in Christ’s passion in her new work *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*, (Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Smith, 171.

leaders engaged in the difficult task of interpreting why religion matters is an increasingly dim prospect.

### **An Alternative Curriculum of Vocation**

Luckily, the inspired young leaders I interviewed are indeed equipping their congregants to change the world as the gospel mandates. My primary hunch after hearing their stories is to continue looking for pockets of church that slipped through the cracks of Smith's convincing description. My interviewees revealed glimpses of local congregations, college chaplaincies, district youth councils, conference youth gatherings, parents, pastors, and peers who are indeed identifying leaders and calling them into niches where their unique gifts can emerge, be celebrated, and receive nurture.

I am hopeful about these places where disciples are equipping disciples who care about the "real world" – its poor, its hungry, its war-torn, its terror-ridden, its endangered species as well as its clean air, water, and soil. To quote the eloquently sensible Jim Wallis, whose hope inspires my own: "We are the ones we've been waiting for."<sup>9</sup> In that spirit, I offer a few practical implications for enriching our ecologies of leadership formation:

- Let college chaplains know how vital their role is in recruiting leadership for the church. Find ways of conveying their importance to the annual conferences and foundations that support those ministries.
- Continue to support the long history of efforts to increase the visibility, professional recognition, compensation, job security, and viable career tracts for people called into educational ministries of the church *while simultaneously* supporting the creation of niche ministries that may need to resist the rubric of "Christian Education."
- Continue to affirm the theological integrity and vital necessity of niche ministries that do not require itineration, but may indeed require ritual leadership, including sacraments.
- Encourage high-quality, denominationally-inspired theological education for part-time youth ministers. This has the added benefit of connecting them to peers and professors who might mentor their leadership aspirations as further callings evolve.
- Continue to emphasize the importance of district and conference level youth events, especially fostering a view of them as sites for youth to create ministries over which they have ownership and are given the opportunity to succeed.
- Acknowledge the culture of sport that is regnant in our time. In my community, the soccer coach has more hours-per-child of influence each week than I do as a Sunday School teacher. Acknowledging this fact could translate into concerted efforts to transform the theological vision of the coach, teacher, guidance counselor and parent in our congregations, fostering their own deep spirituality and an accompanying capacity to mentor.

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<sup>9</sup> Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: A New Vision for Faith and Politics in America*, (Harper Collins: San Francisco, 2005), 373.

These practical suggestions are insignificant if they are not accompanied by a vision of our task as the church to shape public imagination, critique culture, and envision alternate realities.

There is a curriculum of vocation operative in contemporary U.S. culture. It is guided by images of financial success, entrepreneurial ability, and entertainment value.<sup>10</sup> It is pervasively conveyed through much that we see on television, movies, national sporting events, and the advertising industry. It is uncritically supported by well-meaning church people who hold within them the power to awaken more abiding vocational commitments.

In closing, I want to posit only the briefest idea of an alternative curriculum sleeping within our Christian tradition. Based on the life and teachings of Jesus who healed the lame, forgave sinners, fed the hungry, and subverted hierarchies of wealth and status, this curriculum of vocation understands the world as an immense ecology that *desperately needs* each person to find the niche where his talents and her gifts can be uniquely offered.

Mark, standing before his congregation on the Sunday of his high school graduation, expressed a desire to fill the niche of a physical therapist. Literally and figuratively, he wants to heal the lame. We should encourage such a calling! The woman I counseled to consider elder's orders had likewise discerned her niche. That niche, once comfortably subsumed under the heading "Christian Education" might be better named with an array of tantalizing descriptors that convey the importance of translating the salvific nature of the Christian faith to a world at risk. Literally and figuratively, she wants to "go forth and make disciples." We should encourage such a calling, whatever distinct form it takes.

Both of these examples, as well as many of the comments shared by my interviewees, point to the importance of fostering within our congregations safe and hospitable places to do the authentic work of careful, specific, vocational discernment. Young people need encouragement to critique the flow of adulthood to "success American style." Their mentors and guides need inspiration to engage in the risky business of awakening the "shadow governments of idealism and compassion" residing within individuals, fostering epiphanies of recruitment that flourish into ongoing incarnations of the holy in our midst.<sup>11</sup>

### **A Postscript**

As a distinctively feminist theologian shaped and formed by the United Methodist Church, I resist contemporary U.S. notions of God which domesticate, homogenize, manipulate, and oversimplify the deity. I go in search of stories that reveal the divine equivalent of a rainforest brimming with an incredible array of biodiversity. The survival of our planet requires wild spaces where such diversity is free to flourish. The survival of our species might likewise be in need of rainforests of the spirit, fertile spaces where uncensored visions of the Holy are free to fly around, mingle, mate, and give birth to new species. Finding a niche in an ecosystem like this seems rather inviting.

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<sup>10</sup> Lytch, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Mahan, 30.

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