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## Study guide

### Tap into your vocation

By Robert C. Blezard

We commonly think of “vocation” as only our job or career—that is, what we do to provide for ourselves and our family. But from a standpoint of faith, vocation is what we do in response to the gospel. It has implications that are both broad (What does God want from my life?) and narrow (How can my faith inform my specific role as co-worker/cousin/citizen/spouse, etc.).

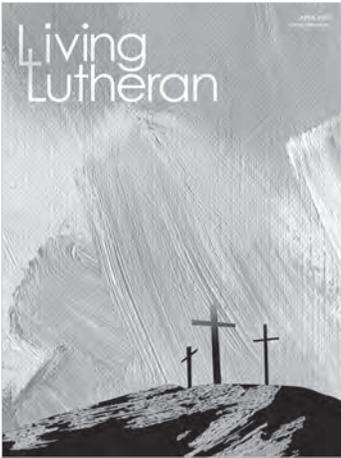
#### Exercise 1: Baptismal covenant

Our life vocation is to live as children of God. For Lutherans, baptism marks that life, as we are washed clean of sin and born anew to live with God in faithful covenant—a relationship with mutual promises. Our baptismal covenant gives us a sort of “job description” for our vocation as children of God. The baptismal rites in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* outline that covenant, as in the Affirmation of Baptism, where God’s people are asked (page 236):

*Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:  
to live among God’s faithful people,  
to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s Supper,  
to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,  
to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,  
and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?*

Discuss:

- If two people are “dating,” that’s a relationship. If they get married, that’s a covenant. Explain the difference between a relationship and a covenant. How does that relate to the baptismal covenant we have with God?
- Explore the following elements of what it might entail to “live among God’s faithful people” by discussing why each is significant and ranking them in importance: physical proximity, communal worship, active friendships, emotional connection, honest sharing, spiritual bonding, mutual edification, trust.
- Why is hearing God’s word and sharing in the Lord’s Supper important for the life of a child of God? Why is it important to you? What happens if we fail to do this?
- Explain what it means to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word. List ways that we, in our vocation as children of God, can do this in our daily lives. List ways that you do (or have done) this.
- What do we “say” with our deeds? (Consider: *While driving, you see two people standing at the start of a crosswalk. What do you “proclaim” if you not*



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## Study guide: **Tap into your vocation** *continued*

*stop to let them cross? If you do stop?)* What, then, does it mean to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through deed? What are some specific deeds that proclaim the good news? What are such deeds that you have done?

- Name one or two of your favorite Bible stories of Jesus serving others. Describe the example Jesus sets for us in serving people. In what ways can/does the church follow this example? And, how are you doing?
- What does “justice” mean as the term is used biblically? What are some justice issues confronting your community today? Our nation? Our world? What are some specific ways that Christians can and should “strive for justice”? How are you doing with this?
- Describe what is meant by “peace” in the following senses: in our hearts, in our families/relationships, in our communities, in our congregations, in our nation, in our world. How do we fulfill our covenant to “strive for peace” in these settings and in the world? Where does it start? How have you worked this in your life? Your congregation?
- On page 236 of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the response to the baptismal promises is: “I will, and I ask God to help and guide me.” Explain the need for God’s help and guidance in daily living. How do you and your congregation seek it, hear it and follow it?
- What final observations, conclusions or concerns do you have about your vocation as a child of God?

### Exercise 2: Life vocation

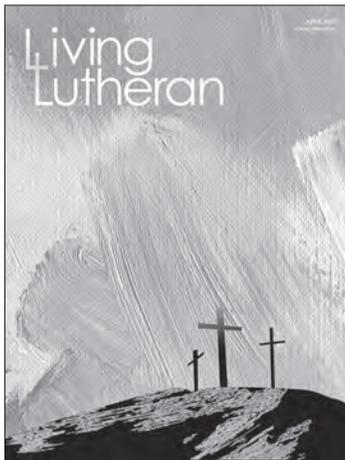
In the broadest sense, vocation is everything we do with our lives as children of God in response to God’s love and baptismal covenant with us.

Consider: Of the thousands of teachings in the Bible, Jesus declares that “all the law and the prophets” are encapsulated in the twin commandments to love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:40).

And as Martin Luther writes: *To serve God simply means to do what God has commanded and not do what God has forbidden. And if only we would accustom ourselves to this view, the entire world would be full of service to God, not only in our churches but also in the home, the kitchen, the cellar, the workshop and the field of townfolk and farmers (What Luther Says, Concordia House Press, 1959).*

So how is the church doing? Discuss:

- What does it mean in daily living to love God with our whole being? Do we do it? (Do you?) Why or why not?
- What does it mean in daily living to love our neighbor as ourselves? Do we do it? (Do you?) Why or why not?
- Is there any day, hour, minute or second that God does not ask us to live by these two commandments?



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- Is there any circumstance or situation where we are excused from following these commands?
- As a result, in what ways is it reasonable to see the entirety of our lives as a vocation of serving God?
- What would our denomination look like if, as Luther puts it, “only we would accustom ourselves to this view”? Your congregation? Your community? Our nation? Our world?
- What steps can we take to do better?

### Exercise 3: Everyday vocations

Life is pretty complex. Although our “life vocation” is to love God and neighbor in all we do, most of us can categorize our lives by the roles we fulfill in multiple spheres—chiefly household, church and society. (For example, in family you may be parent, child, aunt, cousin, etc.) Those roles make up the “everyday vocations” that God has set out for us.

Start exploring this concept by listing the most important three, four or five roles you play in each of these spheres: family, work, social. Discuss:

- How are they distinct? How do they relate?
- How is each one of them an “everyday vocation” from God?

Now review each “everyday vocation” and discuss:

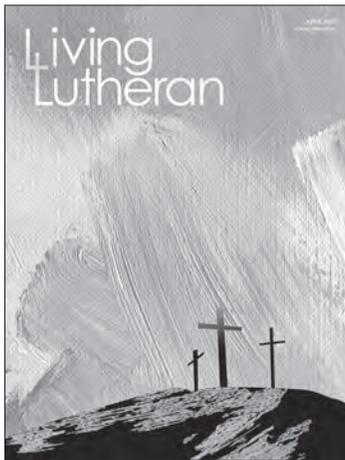
- How does this relate to the bigger picture of my vocation to love God with my whole heart and my neighbor as myself?
- How does seeing each role as an “everyday vocation” change my understanding of that role in my life? (How should it?)
- How faithful have I been to this “everyday vocation”?
- How can I do better?

### Exercise 4: Your spiritual vocation(s)

It may be true that our whole lives are a vocation, but God gives each of us different strengths and gifts that can be put to good use in God’s ministry. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:11-12: “All these [gifts] are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

What are the spiritual gifts God has given to you? To zero in on these gifts, invite members of the study group to take the online ELCA Spiritual Gifts Assessment ([bit.ly/2y6OQnW](http://bit.ly/2y6OQnW)) and—if they are comfortable doing so—to bring the results to the next class for discussion (this can be done remotely). Questions could include:

- Describe the kinds of gifts and skills that members bring to your church. (You could start by naming members who are gifted and skilled.)



### About the study guide author:

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- How do they work together for the good of the church?
- Looking at your own spiritual gifts assessment, what surprised you? Why? What didn't surprise you, and why?
- Are there gifts you have that are already in use for the church or community? Explain.
- Are there gifts of which you were unaware? How might they be used in service to church or community?
- How can the church and community help others to recognize and use their gifts and talents?
- If everyone was able to use their gifts and talents for the church and community, how would that change things? How would it change people?

### Discussion questions

- Pair up in your study group (this can be done remotely) and spend two minutes apiece explaining to one another your understanding of "vocation" as it relates to our life of faith. When done, invite people to share, with a group leader taking notes. When done, craft together a consensus definition of vocation and discuss how it relates to discipleship.
- God created human beings. What do you think is the purpose for human beings? What does God expect of human beings? What are God's hopes for human beings? How do you know? (Now go back and answer the questions substituting "me" and "us" for "human beings.") In what way can the term "vocation" be understood as living out that purpose?
- What are some of the important roles you play in life? Can all the roles be considered a vocation of God? If so, why? If not, why not? What aspects of our lives are exempt from God's expectations and hopes for us as children of God? Why?
- Do you believe, as Michael Bennethum suggests in the article, that "any kind of honorable work, any daily activity ... becomes an expression of vocation"? How? Why? What does it mean for you?

# Tap into your vocation

By Erin Strybis

## *What shall I do with my life?*

The question puzzles us as youngsters, when we hear well-meaning adults ask, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” It riddles us as students, when teachers inquire about postgraduation plans. It presses on us in adulthood, when we consider work, volunteer opportunities or further schooling. We face it again when our jobs end, our children move out, our loved ones depart or our living arrangements shift.



*What do you want to be when you grow up?*

The Christian answer to the question “What shall I do with my life,” asserts Dorothy C. Bass, is vocation. In other words: “Respond to God’s call.”

Bass, a Lutheran author, studied vocation and other associated topics alongside her husband, Lutheran academic Mark Schwehn, while updating their anthology *Leading Lives That Matter* (Eerdmans, 2006) for publication of a second edition this June. Though student input guided the first edition, Schwehn said vocational discernment isn’t just for young people.

“Vocation has to do with the shape and meaning of a human life,” he said. “So long as [you’re] alive and functioning, you have multiple callings, such as grandparent, parishioner or citizen. . . . It’s very Lutheran to think you’re multiply stationed in places of responsibility.”

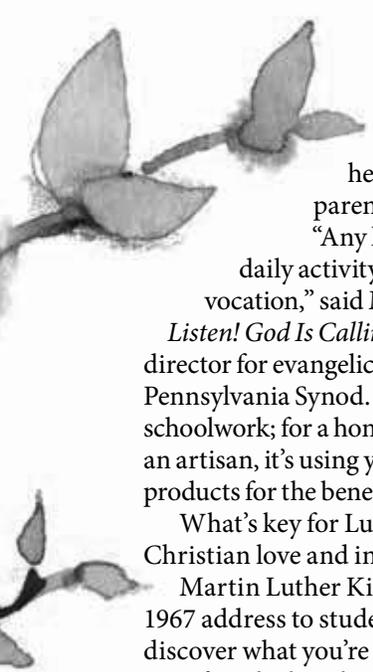


## **Luther on vocation**

In Martin Luther’s day, the general public believed that those called to ministry were more noble than the common person. The word “*vocacio*” was reserved for spiritual occupations, such as being a priest or nun, said Timothy Wengert, professor emeritus of Reformation history at United Lutheran Seminary.

What’s revolutionary about Luther’s theology is that he believed God calls *everyone* to serve, Wengert noted. Vocation gives our lives purpose from childhood through older adulthood. “He [understands] that we are called through our baptism. He also insists that we are called into this world to serve our neighbor,” he said. “Luther understood the callings of God to include absolutely *everything* we do in life.”

Vocation includes both our daily rhythms or livelihoods and our responsibilities as they relate to



others. Luther was especially interested in familial relationships. The very act of changing diapers, he declared, is living out one's parental vocation.

"Any kind of honorable work, any daily activity ... becomes an expression of vocation," said Michael Bennethum, author of *Listen! God Is Calling!* (Augsburg Fortress, 2003) and director for evangelical mission in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod. "For a child, that calling might be schoolwork; for a homemaker, it's keeping a home; for an artisan, it's using your gifts or talents to create good products for the benefit of customers."

What's key for Luther is living with a sense of Christian love and intentionality, he added.

Martin Luther King Jr. echoed such notions in a 1967 address to students in Philadelphia: "When you discover what you're going to do in life, set out to do it as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it. ... If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures. Sweep streets like Beethoven composed music. Sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.'"

Even work that society deems lowly is honorable in God's eyes insofar as it contributes to the well-being of our neighbors. Luther's teachings on vocation bring dignity to our daily living.

One criticism of Luther's stance on vocation is that it suggests menial laborers should be content with their station in life. Bennethum said this is a misunderstanding: "[People suggest] Luther is trying to keep the servant class down. [Luther] was for social mobility. ... What he was saying is you *may* stay in the social role and position you're in. He was acting over and against a religious culture that said the only way to lead a holy life was to enter ministry."

Every moment can be holy when you live your days attuned to God's call.

### Realms of responsibility

"For Luther the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to which we are joined in our baptisms, frees us from having to impress God with who we are or what we do. By faith in God's promise in Christ we are free to serve our neighbor not by escaping from this work to live among religious people, but by living our everyday lives" (*Luther's Small Catechism, Anniversary Study Edition*; Augsburg Fortress; 2016).

How do people shift their perspective and tap into their vocation? Luther's household chart, found in his *Small Catechism*, is a great starting point, Wengert said. Luther divided life into three arenas:

- *Household (this encompasses family life and career because many worked from the home during his time).*
- *Church.*
- *Society.*

The text that follows breaks down these realms even further to guide reflection on your unique vocation. Pull out a pad of paper, open your laptop or launch the Notes app on your smartphone, and use this section to reflect on your myriad callings.

#### 1. At home or work

Child. Sibling. Parent. Doting grandparent. Proud godparent. Partner. Spouse. Roommate. Friend. Pet whisperer. Tender of houseplants. Begin your exploration of vocation by considering the many "hats" you wear at home—some are duty-driven; others relational. Ask yourself: Who or what do I care for? And who cares for me? Jot down each unique role.

Who or what do I care for?



Luther notes in his household chart that even widowers have a role to fulfill. If you are mourning, you might also name that on your list. Additionally, if you actively host visitors such as neighbors or exchange students, you can write down “host/hostess.”

Now reflect on your daily work. You may be actively studying, raising children, working for an organization or a company, taking a break from work or retired. Perhaps you're a consultant or other freelancer. Maybe you're in ministry or the armed services.

Describe your duties. Consider the micro-responsibilities associated with your calls. For example, a pastor may also write and speak extensively outside of her congregation. A retiree may live his vocation by pursuing travel, hobbies, time with family or volunteerism.

When you can write no further, examine your list. Consider the sense of satisfaction you derive from performing such roles. Ask: Which calls bring me the most joy? How about the most dread? Are there roles that I'm not actively embracing?

Spend some time brainstorming fresh approaches you can bring to each call. For example, you may resolve to approach your friendships with more intention. Or maybe a shift in perspective will provide extra energy the next time you're summoned to parent or grandparent a child.

## 2. In your church

In her role as spiritual gifts director for Women of the ELCA, Valora Starr has observed that parishioners still tend to see vocation as relegated to rostered ministers.

Luther would remind us that our call as members of a faith community is equally important, Wengert said. Answering this call can take a variety of shapes, including our presence at worship, our friendship toward

others in our congregation, our leadership in a committee or our mentoring of young people.

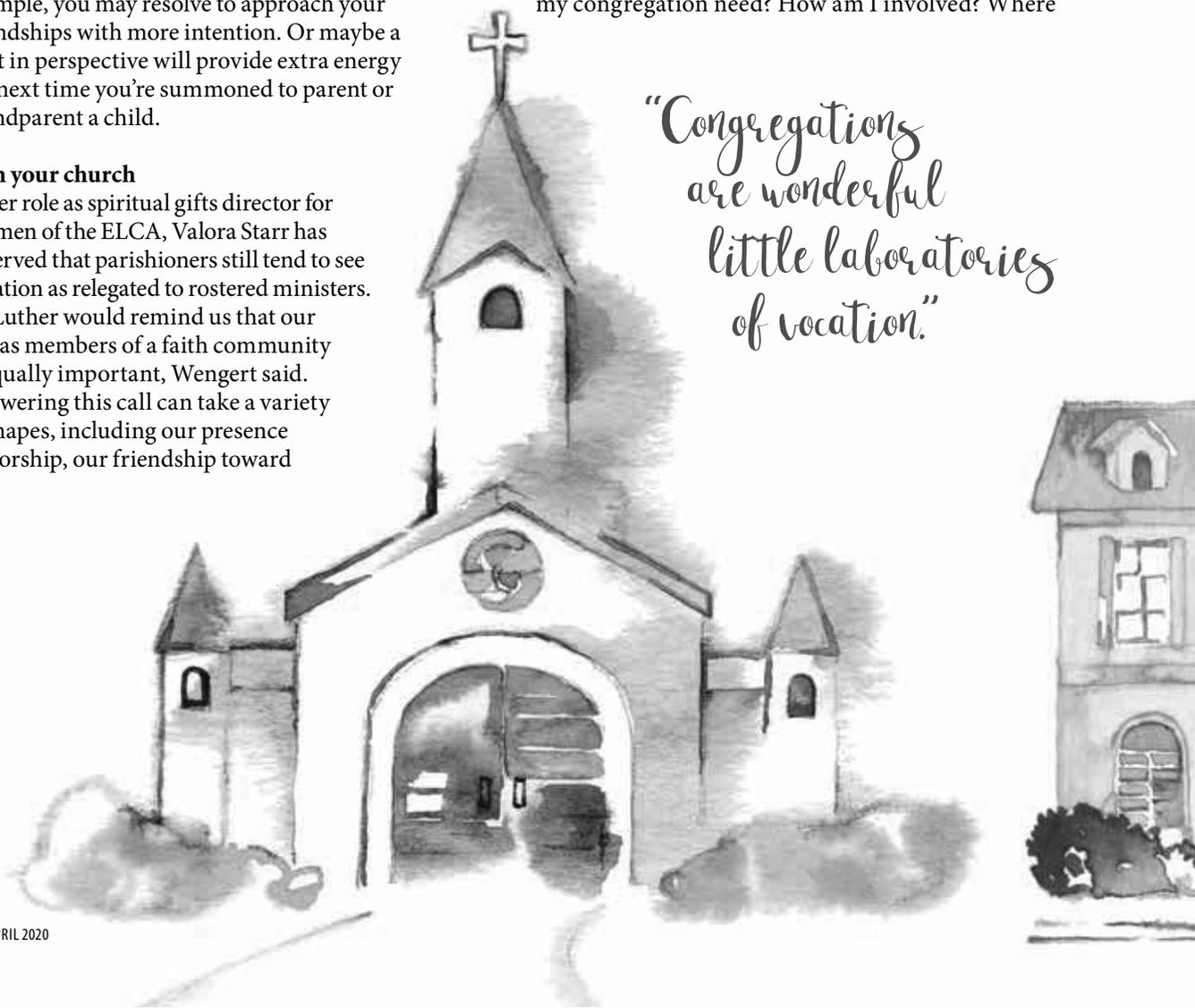
For this call, it's important to discern all of one's gifts and talents. An incorrect volunteer match can diminish a parishioner's joy or sense of purpose in his congregation, Starr said. For example, a banker joins a congregation and is expected to be the treasurer. She really wants to volunteer using gifts besides her ability to work with numbers, but she feels stuck in this call and eventually burns out.

This is where the ELCA's spiritual gifts assessment tool can come in handy. Starr suggests that ELCA members use the tool to appraise all their spiritual gifts so they can find volunteer opportunities more closely matching their natural talents and abilities.

Congregations need musicians, teachers, preachers, committee members, readers, greeters, quilters, organizers and others for creative, innovative ministries. “Congregations are wonderful little laboratories of vocation,” Bass said. “Older people and rostered [ministers] are often crucial in helping young [parishioners] determine their vocation.”

Before volunteering, ask yourself: What does my congregation need? How am I involved? Where

*“Congregations  
are wonderful  
little laboratories  
of vocation.”*



do I need to step back in order to realign my talents with the existing calls? Jot down your answers.

Beyond your congregation, consider living out your calling through your synod. If you aren't already receiving your synod's newsletter, sign up. What speaks to you? There may be synod-led initiatives you can support.

Your vocation as an ELCA member also includes the work of the churchwide organization. From ELCA World Hunger to ELCA Advocacy to the ELCA Youth Gathering, there is a place for you to match your talents with existing ministries. Learn more at [elca.org/our-work](http://elca.org/our-work).

Consider your spiritual gifts and passions and the ways they might match the needs of the ELCA in its three expressions (your congregation, your synod and the churchwide organization). Ask: Do I feel tugged toward leadership? Do I feel a need to step back from congregational work that is not fulfilling and make room for new opportunities? Write this down.

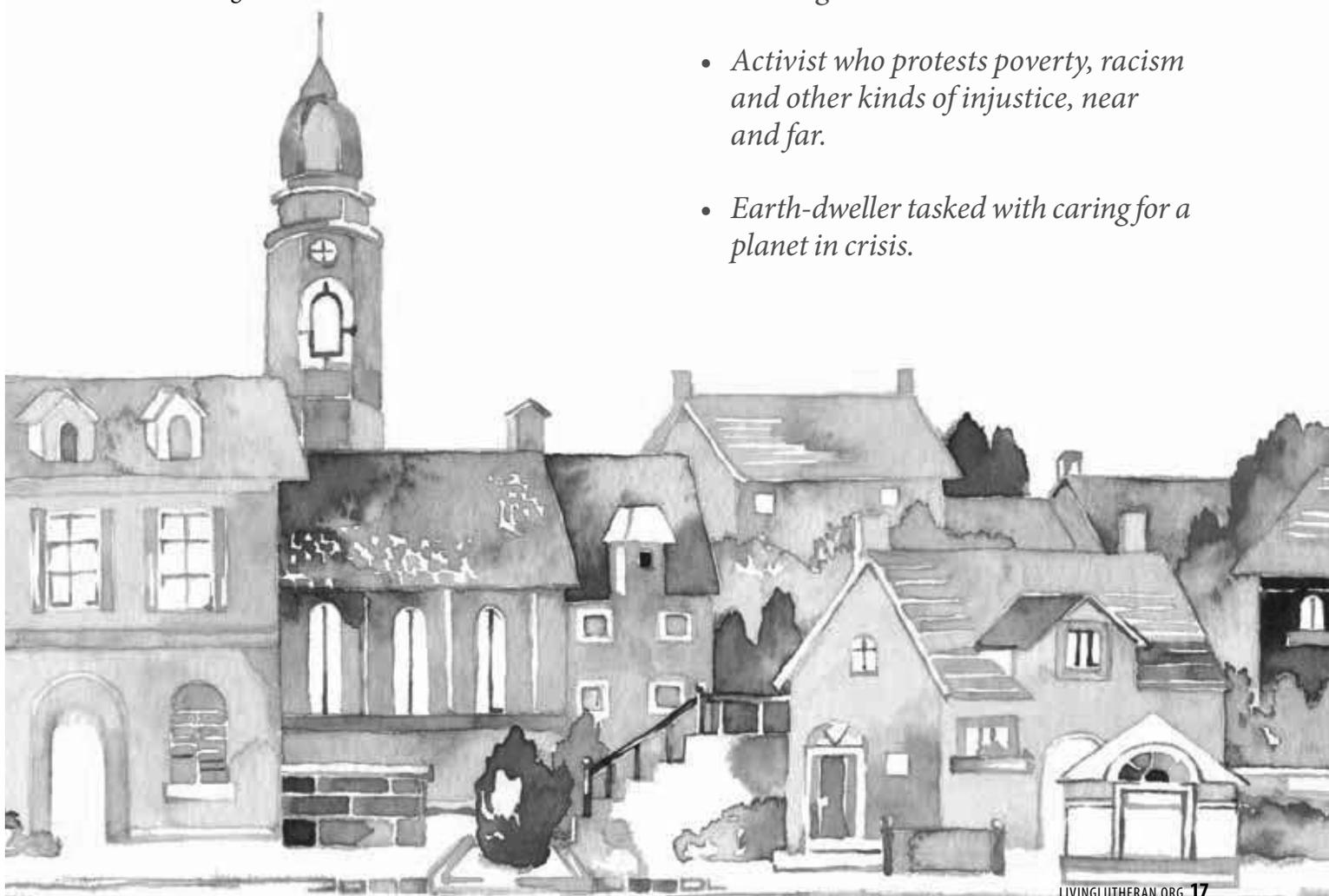
Remember, you don't have to do it all. We are part of a faith community doing God's work with our hands—together.

### 3. Around the block, country and world

Finally, consider your vocation as it relates to society. Luther knew the church wasn't the center of the universe. He was more interested in how God calls us outside the church walls. "The absolute core of Luther's ethics is the notion of neighbor love," Bennethum said.

Vocation urges us to love and serve our neighbors. Calls in society include being a:

- *Neighbor to people living on our block or in our community.*
- *Greeter to those visiting or seeking refuge in our city.*
- *Citizen who votes, pays taxes, obeys laws and speaks out against injustice.*
- *Volunteer who assists schools or civic organizations.*
- *Activist who protests poverty, racism and other kinds of injustice, near and far.*
- *Earth-dweller tasked with caring for a planet in crisis.*





Write down these calls and take time to consider each one. How are you living out your vocation as a neighbor? Where can you grow or improve? What's missing from this list that is key to your sense of neighborly service?

### **Listen to God**

For Lutherans, the question “What shall I do with my life?” has many answers, but we need listen to only one voice—God’s.

Bafana Khumalo, a bi-vocational pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and a prominent activist for HIV and AIDS issues, human rights and gender justice, said it took him years to awaken to God’s call in his life. When he finally “stopped running,” the course of his life changed for good, marrying his social justice work with faith.

For those overwhelmed by the many calls available in one’s life, Khumalo has this advice:

“God uses many ways to speak to us and get through to us. Listen to [God’s] voice. Pray about it and allow the Holy Spirit to guide you.”

Much has changed since Luther introduced a new lens for vocation—we’re living with new technologies, cultural challenges and environmental issues. The only constant is that God continues to call each of us to love and serve our neighbors.

Sometimes answering God’s call is easy. Other times it pulls us from our comfort zones. Nevertheless, Wengert believes that Lutherans are uniquely positioned to respond to God’s call in this time and space.

“No other church emphasizes [vocation] quite the way Lutherans do,” he said. “It’s something to be proud of. I think it’s part of the reason we have so many social ministries, not just in the ELCA but in the Lutheran World Federation too.”



For Lutherans,  
the question  
“What shall I do  
with my life?”  
has many answers,  
but we need listen to  
only one voice—God’s.



The many organizations that act on behalf of the church remind us that we are not alone in our vocations. We are members of a vibrant global church, professing the gospel in word and deed.

Despite our good efforts, sometimes the church falls short. We may run away from our calls. We might fail to raise our voices.

“Where is the voice of the church that says our God is a God who loves all of us unconditionally?” Khumalo asked. “We need to escalate our voices so that we represent who has sent us—that is our mission in the world.”

Vocation requires courage. This is where we must lean on our faith. Though God calls us into service through baptism, we can’t do it all and we won’t get it right every time. We can do nothing to save the world ourselves—that job is for Jesus Christ alone. God acts through us. †

### Resources

- *Luther’s Small Catechism, Anniversary Study Edition* by Martin Luther (Augsburg Fortress, 2016).
- *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*, edited by Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass, second edition (Eerdmans, 2020).
- “Spiritual Gifts Assessment Tool” (search for the title at [elca.org](http://elca.org)).
- *Listen! God Is Calling!: Luther Speaks of Vocation, Faith, and Work* by D. Michael Bennethum (Augsburg Fortress, 2003).
- *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation Throughout Life’s Seasons*, edited by Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Eerdmans, 2017).

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