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Chris Keeton

Hernando Church of Christ, keeton.chris@gmail.com

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DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Creating Vocational Curriculums for Youth Ministries: Challenges and Opportunities

Chris Keeton

Abstract: This essay reflects on the creation of a vocational curriculum produced by the author's doctoral project. The goal is to explore the value in vocational reflection among teenagers in youth groups, and to offer an example of how youth ministries may implement extended and holistic teaching programs regarding the theology of vocation.

This essay begins with an assessment of the ministry context. Second, it reviews templates for vocational curricula used on some college campuses and how the author implemented those strategies into the project. Two key strategies were a common curriculum and a mentoring environment. Such templates were found in the Programs for the Exploration of Vocation and the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education. Third, this essay examines particular opportunities present for youth ministries regarding vocation.

Teenagers transitioning to post-high-school rhythms must navigate new personal and occupational pressures. Youth ministries are in a unique place to provide spiritual and theological guidance for teens during this life stage, particularly in the form of providing resources regarding vocation, which is the task of discerning how God calls each of us in particular ways. This requires not only a Biblical and theological foundation, but also a reliable method to present those theological principles. What follows is a narration of challenges faced within the ministerial context, particularly the desire to remain relevant to the post-high-school life, and the description of my method for creating a wholistic teaching curriculum, one that teaches students to acknowledge the practical realities of life while also helping them realize the spiritual implications of life choices. My method was

patterned after programs associated with the Programs for the Exploration of Vocation and the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education.

This is the first article in a two-part series where I share my experience in creating a vocational curriculum for my youth group. This endeavor was part of my doctoral project at Lipscomb University. This article will discuss the method of the curriculum's creation. The next article will discuss the biblical and theological content of the curriculum.

Context

For eight years I have served as the youth minister for the Hernando Church of Christ, which is located in the center of Hernando, Mississippi. The city has experienced exponential growth since the 1990s, becoming one of Memphis's many suburbs.¹ And though the city has transformed in some respects, the church has maintained its blue-collar identity. Most of the members, approximately 120, are late middle-aged to retirement age. Most work in blue-collar occupations along with several working in education and the medical field. There are only a few young families with kids.

A few years into my ministry I noticed that my students exhibited a variety of attitudes as they considered their life options after graduation. Some were confident and excited, some were anxious, and others were indifferent. There were those who readily traced out their life goals, but others had no idea what would happen to them after high school. But, with only a few exceptions, there was one constant—students rarely indicated any explicit spiritual integration regarding their plans for the future. I decided to make that phenomenon the focus of my doctoral project. My goal was to help teenagers preparing for post-high-school life integrate their spirituality with their goals and career trajectories.

When I began researching the literature, I discovered that what I was seeing in my youth group is common to the majority of teenagers. For most graduating high-school seniors, there is a divide between faith and daily life. Tim Clydesdale comments on this phenomenon:

Teens view religious faith and practice as largely irrelevant to this stage in their life cycle. Religion is something they did as 'kids' and something they will probably do again as 'adults.' But, for now, teens tune out religion—at the very moment when they make decisions that can affect the rest of their lives and during the very time when they individually

¹ See United States Census Bureau, "American Fact Finder," under "Hernando City, Mississippi," https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml (accessed December 19, 2019).

establish patterns of everyday living. One of the largest and longest-established cultural sources of direction and purpose, then, is frequently muted, leaving teens fewer resources with which they can evaluate goals or prioritize daily tasks.² Moreover, for the few teens with strong faith commitments, Clydesdale reports a considerable ineptitude to connect their religious knowledge with the rest of their lives.

At first I wanted to create a theology of work targeted to teenagers. But Dr. Walter Surdacki, my project advisor, encouraged me to think bigger. These teens were not just trying to figure out what they wanted to do, but also who they wanted to be.³ In other words, they wanted to know their vocation, whether they realized it or not.

The term “vocation” has had an unruly path. By the medieval period, the term referred to the clergy or the monastic life.⁴ Vocation referred to God’s call to the higher, more spiritual, ways of life, like the clergy or the monastics. The laity may be “called” by God in some sense, but common labor did not deserve to be called a vocation. Some of the Reformers, particularly Martin Luther and John Calvin, argued for a flattening of occupational ranks. They affirmed that the farmer occupied just as much a spiritual estate as the Bishops, or even the Pope.⁵ But then the term quickly slid to the other extreme. The great commercial economy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gave the creation of wealth to more and more people. The business world felt less responsibility to the church polity and focused its moral and spiritual energies toward the work they felt they were called to do. After all, the Reformation placed its spiritual stamp on all labor. During this period, vocation became connected almost exclusively to work.⁶

² Tim Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 205

³ This insightful phrasing of the issue is taken from Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Leading Lives that Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 2-3.

⁴ For an overview of this history see Robert L. Calhoun, “Work and Vocation in Christian History,” in *Work and Vocation*, ed. John Oliver Nelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 82-115.

⁵ For example, see Martin Luther, “An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate,” in *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, ed. William C. Placher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 211.

⁶ See Calhoun, “Work and Vocation,” 109-11; Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 4.

This secularized definition is utilized in many school's vocational-technical, or "votech," programs, which is probably most teenagers' first encounter with the term. This usage refers exclusively to learning a trade, and does not consider the older, theological implications of the term.⁷ My project sought to restore a theological understanding of vocation for my youth group, drawing primarily from the perspective of Luther and Calvin.

The definition I used in my project was the following: the active response to God's divine call to live a particular way or to accomplish a particular task or tasks. This definition might be too broad for some. And it is certainly not as poetic as Frederick Buechner's aphorism, "The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁸ But the literature itself is quite broad, and being too specific on the definition would not do justice to many thinkers and writers.⁹ My purpose was simply to get the discussion started as quickly and easily as possible with my teenagers. With a simple definition, my students would be able to get into the conversation. Once in the conversation, they would be able to discover the greater nuance explored in the literature, and maybe even discover that nuance in their own experience and thinking.¹⁰

The Need for a Curriculum

I decided to create a teaching curriculum for my students. The curriculum took the form of three teaching modules with six classes per module, for a total of eighteen classes between September and February. Module 1 would take place from September to October, module 2 from November to December, and module 3 from January to February. The classes would take place during the Wednesday night class periods, which is the highest attended event for the Hernando Church Youth Group (HCYG).

⁷ For an extended discussion see Kathryn A. Kleinhans "Places of Responsibility: Educating for Multiple Callings in Multiple Communities," in *At This Time and In This Place*, ed. David S. Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 101.

⁸ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 95.

⁹ For a curated sampling of a broad range of thinkers writing on issues related to vocation see Schwehn and Bass, *Leading Lives that Matter*.

¹⁰ For an example of nuance in literature compare the following two works: Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of this World: Inquires into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Gary D. Badcock *The Way of Life: A Theology of Vocation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Hardy argues that God's will extends down to the details of career choice, while Badcock disagrees.

This extended curriculum served two purposes. First, a curriculum is a reliable method to present theological principles in my church context. Second, the curriculum advertised myself and the congregation as resources for advice regarding life after high school. This second reason is best understood in light the data gleaned from a series of individual interviews with my youth group.

In an effort to assess the students' awareness and preparation for life after high school, I engaged fifteen students in brief, one-on-one interviews. Six questions were asked:

1. Tell me what excites you about the next ten years of your life.
2. Tell me what concerns you most about the next ten years of your life.
3. What is your dream for your life?
4. Do you know what career you will seek?
5. Whom do you get career advice from?
6. Do you believe that God has called you to a particular purpose?

Two findings were particularly troubling. First, the teenagers I interviewed were very interested in occupational advice from the older generation. Almost nobody asked a similarly aged peer for advice. This corresponds with some studies that have found precisely the same phenomenon.¹¹ Second, my interviews revealed that ministers were not seen as mentors regarding occupational discernment. This also meant that they were not getting much advice from me, either.

Based on those two findings, youth ministers, because they are older, should be seen as mentors, but they are not. This phenomenon coheres with Clydesdale's research findings regarding the divide between faith and daily life. The curriculum would package the wealth of scriptural and theological resources regarding vocation, calling attention the guidance therein for daily life. Moreover, the curriculum would establish the youth ministry, and congregation, as a valuable resource for guidance.

Finding Templates for the Curriculum

This article is not about the content of a vocational curriculum, but about the method I used to create a curriculum. There is no shortage of

¹¹ See Lisa Severy, "Career Development in Emerging Adulthood," in *Emerging Adulthood and Higher Education*, eds., Joseph L. Murray and Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (New York: Routledge, 2019), 81-84.

excellent literature regarding vocation.¹² My intention for this essay is to help youth ministries format those resources into an accessible and systematic format.

In preparing the curriculum for my doctoral project, I sought after programs that had already accomplished what I was setting out to do. I did not find any extensive vocational programs for youth groups, but I did find two broad initiatives that implemented vocational programs for college students. This section will summarize those two initiatives and consider some shortcomings. I will then present how I used those initiatives as a template.

The two initiatives I investigated were the Programs for the Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) and the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE).¹³ Each program worked with colleges and universities to design systematic programs that countered recent criticisms of the universities. Cunningham, director of NetVUE's Scholarly Resources Project, notes that new conversations are occurring which call into question higher education's ability to form a well-functioning adult population. He writes, "undergraduate education—with its lofty ideals and less-narrowly-defined goals—tends to come in for a great deal of scrutiny; concerns are regularly raised concerning cost, value-for-money, access, privilege, and 'return on investment.'"¹⁴ These concerns have negatively affected the perceived importance of a baccalaureate diploma, pushing some to argue that young people should instead seek apprenticeships or self-directed online programs. The correction has often been to focus on how their undergraduate programs benefit future employment

¹² As stated previously, my follow-up article will present how I used Scripture to develop the content of my curriculum. For a sampling of the secondary literature, see the following: Badcock, *The Way of Life*; Hardy, *The Fabric of this World*; Schwehn and Bass, *Leading Lives that Matter*; William C. Placher, ed., *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

¹³ For more information on PTEV see the summary on the Forum for Theological Exploration, "Programs for Theological Exploration of Vocation," <https://fteleaders.org/resources/programs-for-theological-exploration-of-vocation-ptev> (accessed December 18, 2019). See also Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, "Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation," <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/programs-for-the-theological-exploration-of-vocation/> (accessed December 18, 2019). For more information on NetVUE see the website The Council of Independent Colleges, "About NetVUE," <https://www.cic.edu/programs/netvue> (accessed December 18, 2019).

¹⁴ David S. Cunningham, "Introduction: Time and Place: Why Vocation is Crucial to Undergraduate Education Today," in *At This Time and In This Place*, ed. David S. Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

opportunities. But Cunningham argues that this corrective is short-sighted. Employment is certainly on the minds of undergraduate students, but they also face a myriad other concerns as they peer into the coming decades of their lives, including marriage, family planning, what sorts of civic or political engagement they will pursue, or religious activity in which they will participate. Colleges and universities are in a unique position to aid the personal development of students by giving students a wholistic perspective on their life and humanity. These vocational programs intend to train colleges and universities to emphasize this wholistic approach by using the language of vocation, and thus also infuse colleges with goals beyond job training.

Enactment of these programs varies depending on the institution,¹⁵ but general principles have emerged. Cynthia A. Wells has observed NetVUE colleges that have successfully integrated vocational language into their educational programs. Two promising formational strategies have emerged: a common curriculum and a mentoring environment.¹⁶ Each of these strategies have been used in particular contexts to create a campus directed toward a singular institutional mission.

A common curriculum does not aim to replace the standard class requirements of a major. Instead, it seeks to integrate the educational experience in a college context that is increasingly specialized. Wells comments, "The work of vocation can find its impetus in individual gifts, but its fulfillment comes in allowing people to see their gifts in light of communal aims."¹⁷ Dominican University, located in River Forest, Illinois, effectively uses a common curriculum by assigning a variety of seminars that explore vocational themes. Students are allowed to choose which seminars to attend, but their choices are limited based on their grade level: freshman seminars focus on the "examined life," sophomore seminars on "life in community," junior on "life's work," and senior seminars on "the good life."¹⁸ These seminars make up a "common core" of the students' educational experience, directing the students with common texts, a shared theme, and similarly guided questions.

¹⁵ The grant programs page on the NetVUE website provides a survey of how colleges have implemented projects, The Council of Independent Colleges, "Grant Programs," under "Grant Programs," <https://www.cic.edu/programs/netvue> (accessed December 18, 2019).

¹⁶ Cynthia A. Wells, "Finding the Center as Things Fly Apart" in *At This Time and In This Place*, ed. David S. Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 66-71.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67

A mentoring environment is one that shapes the “ethos of an institution in intentional ways around the values and ideals that the college or university has designated as central.”¹⁹ Assigning one individual as another’s mentor can contribute to the culture of individualism and it creates strains on professors who are already over-burdened. Goshen College implemented a program that equipped all college employees to understand themselves as vocational mentors. Employees were equipped to share their own faith and vocational journeys without the need for individual “mentoring sessions.” This did not require professors to set aside particular times for vocational discussions with individual students, but allowed them to spontaneously share their experience as the occasion arose. These opportunities may occur on an individual basis, but more often the opportunities manifested in group settings. Moreover, since every employee was equipped, everyone was in on the conversation. Wells comments, “That environment comprises many things, including individual relationships, course assignments, and brief conversations on the sidewalk.”²⁰

How I Formatted my Curriculum

A common curriculum and a mentoring environment are the two key lessons I learned from NetVUE and PTEV. When creating my curriculum, I ensured those two elements were present throughout. As I discussed previously, the curriculum took the form of three teaching modules. The first module was intended to teach the basic principles of vocation to the youth group. During this module, I prepared three sermons to be preached to the entire congregation regarding vocation. This strategy introduced vocation to the entire congregation. These introductory sermons would serve as vehicles toward the purpose of creating a common curriculum, intending to get the entire congregation thinking and talking about vocation.

To further establish a mentoring environment, the second module required adults from the congregation to present their vocational stories. Six adults would be selected with varying occupations. During the HCYG Wednesday night class, these adults would share their experience in integrating their occupational life with their spiritual life. I would provide a coaching form to each adult that will help them express their calling in the terms delineated in this project. For some adults, the coaching form

¹⁹ Ibid., 68.

²⁰ Ibid., 70

might initiate new spiritual reflection that could take considerable time to process. Therefore, I intend to select these individuals in the beginning of module 1 and schedule one-on-one meetings to provide further guidance if necessary. The coaching form would serve as a launching pad for discussion.

The third and final module worked through several Biblical narratives with the intention of giving the students an idea of the experience of vocation, that is, what vocation *feels* like. This module explores the narratives of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Ruth.

Opportunities for Youth Ministries

Youth ministries stand in a unique place regarding vocational instruction. At least two factors demonstrate the opportunities: the inherent limitations of existing college vocational programs (e.g. NetVUE) and the “first year out” phenomenon.

Colleges participating in the two Lilly funded initiatives have certainly benefited, but the effort is inherently limited. First, not everyone goes to college and earns a degree. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 69.7 percent of 2016 high school graduates were enrolled in college by October, 2016.²¹ Nearly three-quarters of graduating high school seniors is a significant amount, but the amount who do not attend is also significant,²² especially considering that admission policies seem to be weighted in favor of students from higher socio-economic standing.²³ Moreover, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), only about 60 percent of those who are enrolled will finish their degree within six years.²⁴ This means that while most go to college, many

²¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “69.7 percent of 2016 high school graduates enrolled in college in October 2016,” <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/69-point-7-percent-of-2016-high-school-graduates-enrolled-in-college-in-october-2016.htm> (accessed December 18, 2019).

²² This cohort of young people face particular challenges in light of the transition away from high paying manufacturing jobs. See Samuel Halpern, ed., *The Forgotten Half Revisited: American Youth and Young Families, 1988-2008* (Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum, Inc., 1998).

²³ Andrew Delbanco, *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 102-21.

²⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, “Graduation Rates,” <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40> (accessed December 18, 2019). For an analysis of this cohort, please see James Rosenbaum and Janet Rosenbaum, “The New Forgotten Half and Research Directions to Support Them,” wtgrantfoundation.org,

will drop out. Presumably, the effects of vocational direction that colleges offer will certainly be attenuated among those who drop out.

Second, not everyone attends colleges associated with NetVUE and PTEV. PTEV is no longer active. NetVUE is an initiative administered by the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC). Members of CIC includes approximately 700 colleges, universities, and organizations, which is a relatively small amount compared to the over four-thousand institutions of higher education.²⁵ This means that the majority of colleges and universities have no organized effort calling attention to vocation, and are thus vulnerable to the critiques noted by Cunningham.²⁶

Third, not everyone needs to go to college. College classwork often requires hours of sitting still in quiet rooms. Such work requires a particular type of personality and discipline that is not present or developed in every person, just as more practical aptitudes, such as mechanical or artistic skill, are not present in every person.

Some data suggests that our culture is encouraging graduating high-school students to pursue college to the neglect of other career paths.²⁷ For example, there is a growing need for skilled trade laborers which do not require a four-year degree. According to the Associated General Contractors of America, seventy-percent of contractors have great difficulty hiring qualified workers.²⁸ Most of those contractors believe that they will continue having difficulty hiring in the foreseeable future. They are likely correct, according to the NCES, high school students interested in skilled

<http://wtgrantfoundation.org/resource/the-new-forgotten-half-and-research-directions-to-support-them> (accessed December 29, 2019).

²⁵ List can be found on the website of The Council of Independent Colleges, "About NetVUE," under "Members of NetVUE," <https://www.cic.edu/programs/netvue> (accessed December 18, 2019). Compare with the total number of institutions of higher education, see National Center for Education Statistics, "Educational Institutions," <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84> (accessed December 18, 2019).

²⁶ For a similar critique from a non-theological perspective see Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

²⁷ In addition to the data given above, Jeffery Jensen Arnett compares how the United States is lagging behind other countries in implementing school-to-work programs, see Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach* (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007), 368-70.

²⁸ Associated General Contractors of America, "Seventy-Percent of Contractors Have a Hard Time Finding Qualified Craft Workers to Hire Amid Growing Construction Demand, National Survey Finds," <https://www.agc.org/news/2017/08/29/seventy-percent-contractors-have-hard-time-finding-qualified-craft-workers-hire-am-0> (accessed December 18, 2019).

trades has fallen from 1 in 4 in 1990 to 1 in 5 in 2016.²⁹ Moreover, a survey conducted by Team Wolverine's Project Bootstrap found that two-thirds of students are not even familiar with careers in the skilled trades, and only seven-percent have decided to actually pursue a skilled trade.³⁰

This data highlights a growing need in our society, and needs must not be overlooked in the vocational discernment process—remember Buechner's aphorism, "The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."³¹ Perhaps the forty-percent who drop out of college do so because of a crisis in calling, a crisis made more disheartening because of lost time and greater debt in a failed pursuit toward a four-year degree. The blue-collar career path must not be neglected in the vocational discernment process.³² The world needs talented and thoughtful ironworkers just as much as it needs talented and thoughtful actuaries. It would be a betrayal of vocation to encourage a young person to pursue a college education if she is not so called. The very decision to pursue college should be a subject of discernment.

These limitations should not be taken as criticism of NetVUE or PTEV. Their goal, to enrich intellectual and theological exploration of vocation among graduate students, is so noble that high-schools and youth groups should be scrambling to package that goal for a teenage audience. Indeed, the period just before the college years is perhaps the time when vocational direction is needed most, which leads to the second factor demonstrating the opportunities for youth ministries.

Clydesdale presented the results of his longitudinal study surveying ideas and perspectives of students as they transition from high school to college in his book *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School*.³³ Clydesdale conducted 125 in-depth interviews with seventy-

²⁹ National Public Radio, "High-Paying Trade Jobs Sit Empty, While High School Grads Line up for University," <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/25/605092520/high-paying-trade-jobs-sit-empty-while-high-school-grads-line-up-for-university> (accessed December 18, 2019).

³⁰ Wolverine, "Wolverine 2019 Survey Results," Wolverine.com, entry posted October 22, 2019, https://www.wolverine.com/US/en/blog?url=%2F/wolverine_us/wolverine-2019-survey-results/ (accessed December 18, 2019).

³¹ Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 95.

³² For an extended discussion of spirituality in a blue-collar context see Kent L. Duncan, "The Holy Spirit Goes to Work: Facilitating Marketplace Ministry in a Blue-Collar Context," DMin Dissertation, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Meriden, Kansas, 2015. Retrieved from http://agts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/24f_Duncan.pdf.

³³ For a theoretical assessment of this life-stage, see Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

five different teens along with a year of field-research at a public high school in Suburban Township, New Jersey.³⁴ Clydesdale found that, contrary to popular belief, most teens entering college are *not* looking to broaden their experiences. Clydesdale reports, “The first year out, rather than being a time when behavior patterns and life priorities are reexamined and altered, is actually a time when prior patterns and priorities become more deeply habituated.”³⁵ Although changes in responsibilities are dramatic, the first year out is not a time of dramatic changes in life trajectories; instead, the manner of life from high school largely continues into the college years.

Following high school, teens are typically challenged with more personal and economic responsibilities along with navigating a new social environment. These challenges require considerable energy to tackle, so there is little left over for deep soul-searching or piloting a paradigm shift. Clydesdale reports that teens focus primarily on *daily life management*.³⁶ This entails managing personal relationships and their new economic lives. These teens manage those realms fairly well, but doing so seems to require them to halt any serious self-reflection. Clydesdale writes, “most American teens keep core identities in an ‘identity lockbox’ during their first year out and actively resist efforts to examine their self-understandings through classes or to engage their humanity through institutional efforts such as public lectures, the arts, or social activism.”³⁷ With their identities safely in lockboxes, freshly graduated teens are liberated to explore the dynamics and challenges of their new social situation. The closed identity lockbox means that teens in the first year out are entirely practical; and they are more or less immune to pedagogical approaches to address loftier ideals such as meaning and purpose, which includes vocational discernment.³⁸

While there is little hope in fostering meaningful reflection on purpose and vocation during the period of the closed lockbox, Clydesdale argues that windows of opportunity open *before* and *after* the first year out. After the first year out, teens have settled into a routine and are able to reflect beyond daily life patterns. This is the period where programs like PTEV and NetVUE shine. Prior to the first year out, teens have less daily life to manage and more time to think and dream about the loftier ideals required in vocational discernment. During the high school years, a

³⁴ Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 213.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2, 39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

vocational program would have a meaningful effect on the life trajectories of teens entering adulthood, perhaps even calling attention to NetVUE colleges where more vocational discernment will be possible. A more thoughtful trajectory during this period will prove economically beneficial as well, since a student might be able to avoid taking on unnecessary college debt by avoiding dropping out or changing majors. Moreover, such a program would benefit those teens who will not attend NetVUE colleges and those who will not attend a four-year college at all.³⁹

Conclusion

A rich opportunity exists for youth leaders interested in creating opportunities for students to think theologically about their career or station in life. A vocational curriculum is just one example of the attempt to seize such an opportunity. Not every ministerial context will find my particular curriculum effective. Nevertheless, a wholistic effort, one including a common curriculum and a mentoring environment, seems suited to encourage students to explore their deepest longings while also imagining the joy and meaning obtained by answering God's call. In the next article ("Vocation's Unbroken Chain: Biblical Call Stories and the Experience of Vocation," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry*, 6, 2 (2020)) I will share how I used Scripture to create the content of the curriculum.

³⁹ Clydesdale also notes that the first year out is not different for teens who attend four-year universities and those who go directly to work, Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 15.

Chris Keeton is married to Cassidy (Porter) Keeton (2014). They have two sons: Benjamin and Matthew. Chris received a BA (Bible) from Heritage Christian University (2005), a MA (New Testament) from Freed-Hardeman University (2009), a MDiv. from Harding School of Theology (2011), and a DMin from Lipscomb University (2020). He has been the youth minister for the Hernando Church of Christ in Hernando, MS since 2012.