

Helping Young People Examine the Relationship between Faith and Vocation

An Interview with Kim Maphis Early

Program Coordinator, Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation,
Coordinated through The Fund for Theological Education

By Tracy Schier



Since the beginning of the Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) in 2000, Lilly Endowment has awarded 88 North American church-related colleges and universities with grants to implement programs. These “vocation grant” programs, as they are commonly called, are individually designed by the institutions to fit within their own mission and culture as they develop programming to assist young people to examine the relationship between faith and vocational choices, and to offer opportunities for gifted students to explore ministerial options. In addition, the programs are designed to enhance the abilities of faculty and staff members of the participating schools to teach and mentor students as they engage in their vocational decision-making processes. Some of the institutions widen the scope of their programs in order to

involve alumni, parents and trustees.

The impetus for this grants initiative arises out of Lilly Endowment’s belief that vital religious communities are essential for a flourishing and humane society and that to keep religious communities strong and vibrant a new generation of talented and committed leadership, both ordained and lay, is essential. Church-related colleges and universities were identified as offering a locus of opportunity for such efforts. According to the program’s official rationale statement, “Liberal arts colleges and universities—especially those that recognize the value of religious traditions as resources for enlarging their vision of excellence—provide an indispensable educational environment for developing intellectually well formed and religiously committed leaders.” Students in these schools prepare for a wide range of professional careers, but no matter their field, the rationale goes on to say that “...students in liberal arts institutions can be encouraged to understand the mutually interrelated nature of their various endeavors and to view their work in terms of a calling or vocation, which endows their lives and work with lasting meaning.”

The program is coordinated at Vanderbilt University by Kim Maphis Early, a Presbyterian minister with long experience as an administrator in theological education that includes development of a nationwide recruitment program for Vanderbilt Divinity School. The Fund for Theological Education in Atlanta, GA, serves as the host institution for the coordination effort.

This conversation is edited.

Q. The Theological Exploration of Vocation Programs are now into their fifth year involving colleges and universities across the country. With several years of experience behind you, what can you say are the most significant learnings this initiative has prompted?

A. One of the most important things we have learned is that students across the country are hungry for reflection. In campus visits all over I hear how the programs are carving out spaces for renewal and contemplation. Many people tell me over and over how the programs are helping students, faculty and staff to step aside from ‘the busyness’ of higher education and to focus on the meanings of “why I am learning” and “why I teach or work at a university.” Mid-career restlessness can be as common for adult professionals as uncertainty is for undergraduates, and the conversations about vocation are providing a healthy way to contextualize work and choices, both on individual and institutional levels.

Something else that the programs are doing is what one campus has called “breaking the culture of silence” about religion on campus. As we all know, religious conversations can be volatile for any number of reasons. Sometimes this has occurred because the campus culture is moving away from its religious roots; sometimes because it is moving back to its religious roots. Persons from diverse religious traditions and no religious tradition populate our campuses and sometimes, because of lack of understanding, it has been easier to squelch religious conversation than to engage in it. So it is heartening to hear how the vocations programs on many of the campuses have brought religion into campus conversations in a new and healthy way.

I would say too that many of the colleges and universities are engaging less in pre-professional tracking and spending more time exploring the breadth and depth of the liberal arts. Reclaiming the liberal arts reduces the “trade school” movement that was gaining momentum in many colleges and universities. By emphasizing the liberal arts and exploring theology as a resource for campus conversations, academic freedom is actually strengthened. Faculty are finding new justification for certain scholarly interests that may not have been seen as relevant for promotion and tenure within their particular disciplines. And by “allowing” conversation about religion on campus, students who might have a call to ministry can openly engage in a discernment process. I heard of an

instance, a few years ago, when a faculty member said to a student, “You are so smart, why would you go into ministry?” This kind of thinking is changing. The profile of the ministry is being raised and this is a hopeful sign.

Another thing that happens is that conversation about vocation on the campuses reframes the conversation about church relatedness. The former way of asking the question “How church related are we?” could only be answered as a matter of degree: not at all, a little, a lot. Now this question can be asked as an issue of institutional vocation: How true are we to our mission and founding heritage? What will be our relation to these religious organizations that gave us life? The conversations about institutional relation to their parent denominations can become less contentious ones. One of my favorite quotes along these lines came from a faculty member at a traditionally Methodist institution who said, “We read Wesley and found out we didn’t have anything to be embarrassed about.”

What I think is important to remember is that, as you review history, the churches could have founded many types of organizations—even restaurants and fitness centers—but they chose to found educational institutions. I think the programs are helping the colleges and universities to see the good that they have inherited and also understand how they can, in turn, be a resource to the church. A kind of reorienting of relationship between educational institution and the church is happening.

Q. Can you talk about any preconceived notions that you may have had in early stages of PTEV and that have proven to be right or wrong as the programs have taken shape?

A. What has been a real surprise is the breadth of response to the issues. We are seeing a whole new audience for campus-wide work. In a lot of the schools the programs are having a surprisingly rapid institutional impact: administrative structures are being reorganized or the project directors have been engaged as leaders in institutional planning. We see instances of schools re-doing their core curriculum and engaging in new forms of faculty development. I also don’t think anyone saw ahead of time how demanding and time consuming the administrative work would be that the programs required because these colleges and universities are, put simply, very complex institutions.

Q. Looking broadly across institutions, have there been any particular areas where it has been most difficult to infuse the goals of PTEV? Why has this been so and how have some institutions overcome the challenges?

A. Certainly on some campuses we have seen faculty resistance, but that is both isolated and episodic. What is interesting, for schools that have worked hard to unearth

the source of this problem, is that it has been found that faculty resistance is typically not a result of the grant. It is an image of a creeping orthodoxy that might endanger academic freedom, or an image of the institution becoming solely a pre-ministerial school, images that when considered carefully in the light of critical reflection have no basis in fact or practice. But as I said before, the program has instigated real conversations about the role of religion on campuses, conversations that have intellectual sustainability and theological underpinnings that can be expressed in the campus culture.

Some schools have been slower than others to integrate vocational themes into coursework, but again this is usually related to personal or institutional history among particular faculty members who have concerns about evangelization and its relation to academic freedom. The reduction of this resistance is accomplished by careful, honest, guided conversations, and by interaction with schools of superior academic reputation that have been successful in bringing vocational exploration into the academic realm.

Q. Have there been some institutions in which it has been difficult to “reach” certain students? If this is so, what approaches have been successful?

A. Overall my answer to this is no. However, I would say that there are pockets of students who may not be participating. For example, I find that on some campuses there are fewer men than women participating in some programming, retreats for instance. Upon analysis, by asking the question “where are the men on campus?” program directors have found that more men are in certain majors or there may be more men on the athletic teams. So the campuses with these characteristics are reorienting their programming accordingly. You might find the program leaders inviting coaches to a special retreat or offering a day of leadership training for team captains or orienting retreats to certain departmental majors. Burt Howell at Boston College continues to ask the question, “Who’s not here?” as he evaluates his programming. He came up with one novel approach and trained four seniors to do blogs about their senior year and how BC’s particular vocations program has influenced them. The students responding to these blogs are students who might be new to talking about vocation and its meaning to their own lives and thinking about the future, students who might never have registered for other activities of the program.

Q. Each school was encouraged from the outset to design programming according to its own institutional culture. Are there some schools that have individual cultural aspects that others might not and could you share some of that with our readers?

A. Well certainly the schools have very differing approaches and each is peculiar to its own history and theological heritage. While there are common activities among the

schools, there will be differences, for example, in the way that theological reflection is stimulated. A Jesuit school’s retreat will have a different Ignatian flavor from a retreat sponsored by an evangelical Protestant college.

Hellenic College in Massachusetts is another very interesting example of a distinctive program. With 127 students it is the only Greek Orthodox college in the U.S. One of their projects is to support a national Orthodox Christian Fellowship in colleges and universities across the country.

Spellman College in Atlanta is a historically black women’s college in Atlanta. Its program’s focus is on encouraging young women to become pastors and religious leaders within the African American community, and is also designed to launch a national and international conversation about women’s leadership within African-American churches.

This gives you a little taste of the variety you might find among our partner schools.

Q. *Is programming from the grants reaching any graduate students?*

A. I have found that in some universities the nursing and law schools are seeking to become involved in the vocations conversations and programming. Some schools do include graduate programs in their grant planning.

Q. *I think our readers would be interested in knowing some names of schools that have been successful in vocations programming in various areas of the institution such as curriculum, faculty and staff development, student services, and so on. Can you share some of these names and the areas of their success in case anyone wants to look these schools up on the web and make contact?*

A. Well, to start with curriculum, I would name Hendrix and Gordon Colleges; and as far as faculty development goes, Furman has a fine program in place. Loyola Chicago and Messiah have been very successful in staff development.

The University of Notre Dame has done a great job of working with alums. Millsaps College’s programs in service learning and internships are well worth mentioning, and St. Norbert’s has been able to reach their trustees in their programming.

Hanover College has also been successful in its mentoring program and Concordia has done well with relationships with church camps, helping students financially so they can take camp jobs and reflect on ministry. Manchester and Marquette take students abroad to sites that connect their academic work with their dreams and professional futures; Valparaiso, Pepperdine and Holy Cross are doing the same with faculty so that

they can be immersed in the historical/theological roots of the college and the academic enterprise. Dillard and Davidson are connecting with seminaries, the former by encouraging seminary visits and the latter by promoting a trial year in seminary. The College of St. Benedict has done a fine job of helping students engage in spiritual disciplines and they have instituted a program of “spiritual companionship.” Georgetown College in Kentucky and Maryville in Tennessee have good examples of programs involving career services, and Fairfield University has adopted a residential college model for vocational exploration. Grinnell has encouraged its faculty to share their own vocational journeys through personal narratives, and is piloting a mentoring program for student athletes. Calvin has invested in worship leadership as a locus for undergraduate vocational reflection. The good news is that I could name something terrific that is happening on each and every campus.

Q. How have the participating schools shared their learnings with one another?

A. We find that the project leaders and participants across the institutions enjoy sharing and learning from one another. A number of campuses are producing vocational literature and hosting conferences, and of course there are the project websites.

The coordination program’s website, www.ptev.org, can lead people to a variety of shared resources. For example, we have many course syllabi from a variety of institutions in one listing. In other listings we have text bibliography and movie bibliography. And we have numerous links to other sites as well as descriptions of each school’s program. The coordination effort has also launched a very ambitious publications program, supporting four separate volumes on vocation and the production of a DVD and study guide drawn from our fall conference on “Enhancing the Theological Conversation on Vocation.”

Q. What surprises have you had over these years of shepherding the program?

A. How quickly the programs have moved to the center of campus life and how quickly they have sprouted their intellectual legs. Faculty members have responded and offered themselves as scholars to enhance the intellectual inquiries into the theological underpinnings of vocation and its relation to all of the disciplines and careers that students may be working in and planning for. So many faculty members have made this work a part of their “work” that we are guaranteed a rich academic literature out of this whole effort. Another important development is the work of researchers on several campuses who are conducting longitudinal studies on students and faculty members so that we will have sound data to inform our student and faculty development efforts.

Q. What have you learned over the years that can help schools do things even better?

A. We learned early-on that it takes a long time to ramp up for these programs. It takes more staff time to develop truly campus-wide programs than people at first anticipated. We also learned that institutions have to create occasions that help students and faculty and staff to slow down and reflect.

It is important also for colleges and universities to be adaptive. Just because an activity or a program was proposed doesn't ensure that it will work as planned. Program leaders have to respond to pockets of excitement as well as to moments of disengagement and be ready to shift gears when needed. And I hope that everyone knows that the more collaborative they can be with other campus entities the more successful they will be.

Something else that we have learned is in contrast to some of the general literature on higher education and adolescent psychology. We are finding that older adolescents actually are interested in hearing from adults that they respect. An example here is the interest students have in listening to faculty tell their own vocation stories. The power of personal narratives from healthy adults on campus cannot be underestimated. I have found that the campuses involved in our program are experiencing this across the board. It tells me that we have to revisit the developmental literature and listen to this generation of students—they are not anti-adult. Students are intent on figuring out how to listen for God's call to them, and sometimes God's voice comes through adults, even parents! These students are intent on discerning their vocations—whether it be to medicine, law, teaching, ministry, or the many other paths they can choose—and to heed the call thoughtfully and prayerfully in the company of faithful adults.