



Forum for
Theological
Exploration

The FTE Guide to

DISCERNMENT RETREATS

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Young Adults and Vocational Discernment

- Young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 are particularly ripe for digging into the traditions that formed them to question, wonder, and imagine how God wants to work in their lives.
- Young adults are active agents in creating their own futures, and their agency expands in the midst of multiple kinds of diversities.
- Young adults best discover their passions amid peers and role models who embody many diverse images of how to make a difference in the world.
- Young adults—like all of us—store joy and pain in their physical bodies. Therefore, retreats should emphasize practices that invite the body's ways of knowing.

There's the queer black woman who grew up in an emotionally and physically unsafe household where faith values stood in tension with her sexual orientation and gender performance. Her unsuccessful attempts to attend a four-year university eventually landed her a job working in the business office of a taxi leasing company. As she grew, and as her faith evolved, she found a new curiosity, guided by the Spirit, that has led to an exploration of filmmaking and storytelling. In particular, she has interviewed and collected the stories of queer women of color whose faith commitments have shaped the Chicago church landscape.

There's the rapper whose work has led to a grant to fund an all-female hip-hop album. In spite of this recognition, her father says that she's approaching her work all wrong. He insists that she should focus on building celebrity and fame, rather than improving her craft and amplifying under-promoted voices.

And there are others. The PhD student who grapples with the shrinking landscape of theological education. The queer-identifying artist who simultaneously continues to heal from an anti-gay religious space while making sense of a call to ministry among creatives in the fashion world. The music-loving worship leader whose multigenerational household and economically struggling family complicates a path through graduate school that would allow him to pursue his passion for exposing underserved youth to the arts. The list goes on and on—but the questions are the same.

As I have journeyed with young adults through these transitional seasons and complex questions, I am honored to stand with them at moments of life that will almost always be looked back upon as a turning point. And, while it would be easy to get caught up in the surface-level questions, the underlying pastoral task is focusing on the question, "In what ways should my faith inform my next steps?"

With this question, we are reminded of the ways that the gospel calls us to differentiate ourselves from the norms and values we've been taught to embrace—to be, as Jesus prayed, in the world but not of the world.

What are the biblical models and stories that help *you* navigate complex and intersectional questions of faith and vocation? Are you David—facing the

Waiting in Complexity

BY EMILY MCGINLEY, EXPLORATION LAB LEADER

Conversations about faith, family, and vocation are on constant rotation in my ministry at Urban Village Church (Hyde Park-Woodlawn, Illinois). The texture is different, but the questions are, remarkably, the same: "What is the right path to take? How do I navigate the expectations of my family and the complications of life? What ways should my faith inform my next steps?"

These questions come up in various forms from young adults whose lives are following tremendously diverse trajectories.

There's the young white woman from a wealthy suburb who grew up nominally attending a tall steeple church in downtown Chicago. The daughter of successful surgeons who came to a deeper sense of faith in college. She is working to reconcile the family values of high achievement and pursuit of privilege with little regard for the transiency which this all demands. Having been accepted to the top five law schools in the country, she grappled with the growing understanding that deepening one's faith and finding rootedness can force a choice between elite status and building authentic community.

encouragement to consider the kinds of connections they want to maintain after the retreat is over.

Some will choose to remain in contact with us. Some will ask a retreat leader to support them in a mentoring relationship. Others will stay connected to a set of participants who have a shared passion around a particular justice issue or theological question. However these life-giving connections emerge, we affirm the importance of walking away from the retreat with relationships that support young adults in their ongoing discernment and faithful explorations.

The “Next Most Faithful Step”

One of the refrains that echoes throughout all of FTE’s retreats is the idea that while discernment can be about major life decisions and goals that are far off, it is also just as much about “the next most faithful step.”

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We have found it useful to reiterate that discernment does not have to mean immediately figuring out the entire story of a life or knowing its ultimate destination. We openly acknowledge that lives unfold and interruptions happen. Our life stories are more of an improvisation than they are a Homeric journey.³⁵ At our retreats we invite young adults to think about discerning while staying rooted in the daily realities of their lived existence—not off in an ideal world. This is what *mujerista* theologians call *lo cotidiano*—the

realities that we face every day, and how we face them.³⁶

We have found that most participants respond positively when we asked to narrow the scope of their focus to the next most faithful step—to what is in front of them and not years off in the future. FTE strives to create a retreat space that focuses neither on an infinite consideration of options, nor on the assumption that lives have a single, clear, “right” path. We work to engender the sense that discerning the next most faithful step is a vital part of a life lived in faith and service.

³⁵ Bateson, Mary Catherine. *Composing a Life*.

³⁶ Isasi-Diaz, Ada Maria. *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Oris Books, 1996): 172.

Mentoring for Discernment

BY LAWRENCE WHITNEY, EXPLORATION LAB LEADER

“Brother Larry, I’m not sure I believe in hell.” “Brother Larry, I’m thinking about running for student body president.” “Brother Larry, how can the church be so callous?” “Brother Larry, is there room here for me and my gifts for ministry?”

For emerging adults discerning their vocation, social, cultural, familial, and ecclesial pressures frequently result in a sense of disorientation and dislocation. This arises in the midst of the internal process of wrestling with choices that at least feel determinative of all future possibilities. Having a mentor to gesture toward promising prospects and point out potential pitfalls can be a rock of stability amidst this otherwise chaotic maelstrom.

The person with the big fancy title may seem like the best option for a mentor because of the doors they might open, but they may not be able to fully invest and commit due to the distraction of other responsibilities. The pastor you have known since childhood seems an obvious choice, except that they have known you since childhood and may not be able to imagine you any other way. Emerging adults benefit greatly from being pointed toward mentors who have a track record of fostering healthy vocational discernment—but a history of mentoring success is no guarantee that the potential mentor and the mentee will have the right chemistry. It starts with a willingness to respond, to engage at the point of discernment at a particular time, and then it evolves from there.

The basis of good mentoring is trust.

On one hand this means cultivating and exhibiting genuine care and concern. On the other hand, it means establishing and maintaining appropriate professional boundaries.

Mentees must feel that what they are bringing to the mentor is being held in confidence and that the directions in which the mentor points are in

Having a mentor to gesture toward promising prospects and point out potential pitfalls can be a rock of stability amidst this otherwise chaotic maelstrom.

their best interests—rather than those of the mentor or the institution the mentor serves. Good mentors balance the important aspect of encouraging and fostering independence in mentees, while also providing structures of accountability along the way.

Gathering emerging adults to gain perspective on the vocational journey, hear each other's stories and the stories of leaders further along the path, and catch a glimpse of possibilities they had not yet imagined is a precious gift to their discernment processes. Equally important is connecting these emerging adults with mentors who will accompany them for the long haul through the shifts and changes that inevitably transpire on a vocational journey. Sometimes a single journey a young adult can go on in the course of two months can be astounding!

Week 1: I'm thinking about a PhD in psychology.

Week 2: I'd like to be a high school chaplain.

Week 3: I want to work on food justice.

Week 4: How do I get involved in supporting indigenous communities?

Week 5: Maybe I'll go to school for social work.

Week 6: Brother Larry, you're like the Google for vocation!

I think often about the story of Esther³⁷ and how important it was that Mordecai affirmed Esther's role at "such a time as this." Young adults have histories,

particularities, and gifts that make them needed for exactly this moment. In the end, being accompanied by a mentor is often about mentees being reminded of their capacity and the ways in which they are suited for this moment. Mentoring can be the difference between a young adult seeing their vocational journey through and abandoning it as hopeless.

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³⁷ Esther 4:9-17



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Shape the Future*



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