

Seeing it Whole

A Model for Discerning Vocations



Origins of the Model

Experiences of St. Benedict's Workshop

New Testament understandings of grace

Collegeville Seminar on vocation across the lifespan

A contemplative worldview, a habit of seeing things whole

Realization: vocation isn't what people say...

Vocation is not...

- Individual
- Idealized
- Constant
- Singular
- Basically about personal bliss
- Mainly about work

Vocations...

- Arise in community
- Are contextual, situation-specific
- Arise and end
- Are multiple
- Significant vocations always entail elements of obligation and suffering
- Arise across all areas of our life

Vocation & the Mission of God

- God calls the creation to participate in God's mission: the flourishing of all and the reconciliation of all aspects of the creation to one another and to God.
- When we discern and respond to God's callings, we come into fullness of life at the same time that our life serves others in their flourishing.
- Vocation is part of the generous economy of God, not a zero-sum game. The flourishing of any part of the creation spills over in life for others.
- Grace is the power of God that circulates through our callings, moving through us and beyond us.

Paul's understanding of grace

Two important New Testament words: *charis* and *charisma*

Charis: the power of God flowing into the world for fullness of life

- An example from Paul's letter to the Romans: "For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift (*charis*) to strengthen you...." (1:11, NRSV)
- An example from 1 Corinthians: "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace (*charis*) of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind" (1:4-5, NRSV).
- And another: "According to the grace (*charis*) of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it" (3:10, NRSV).
- Problems with empty "gift" language. The gift of God has a particular content!

Charisma: an instance of the flow of God's power into the world through a particular channel

- Grace flows through a person who discerns a calling to a particular action or practice or way of life.
- An example from Romans: “We have gifts (*charismata*) that differ according to the grace (*charis*) given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith....” (12:6).
- An example from 1 Corinthians: “Now there are varieties of gifts (*charismata*), but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (12:4-6)
- The “gift” is recognized as it pours forth for others.

Vocation Circle

Vocation is a single field of experience involving God, a person, all the instruments of their vocation, and all the people they come into contact with.

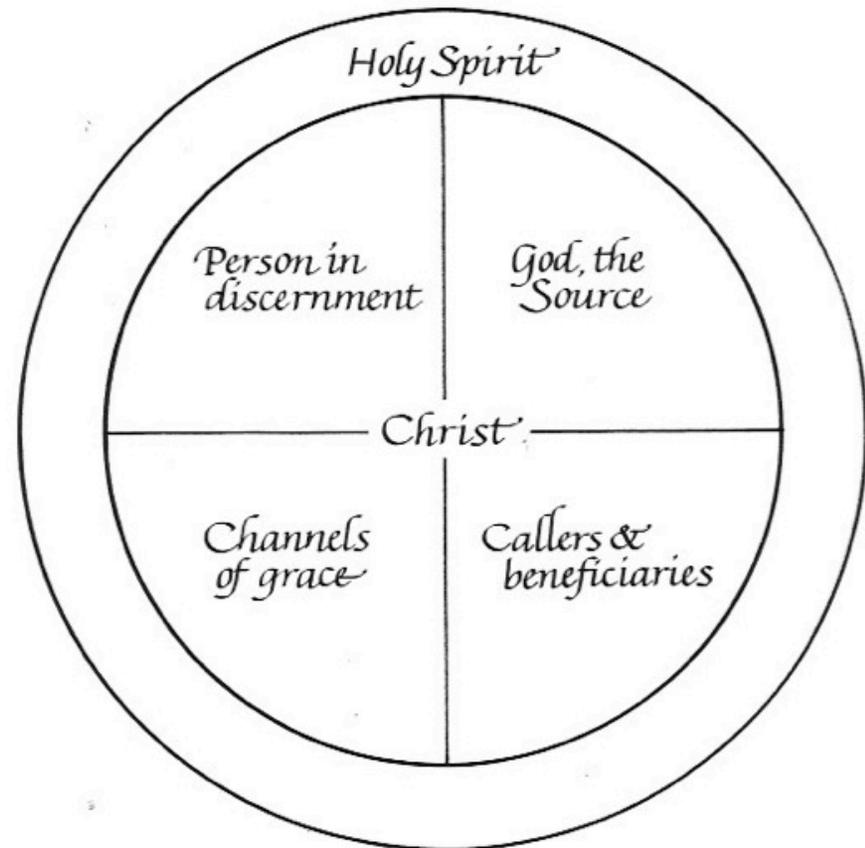
There is no single subject and object.

The upper half (the self and God) is frequently mysterious, transcendent.

The lower half is more knowable, observable.

We experience certain quadrants very intensely at certain stages of our lives, or in certain experiences.

We may experience disability, injustice, failure, and conflicting vocations. But we are never outside the circle.

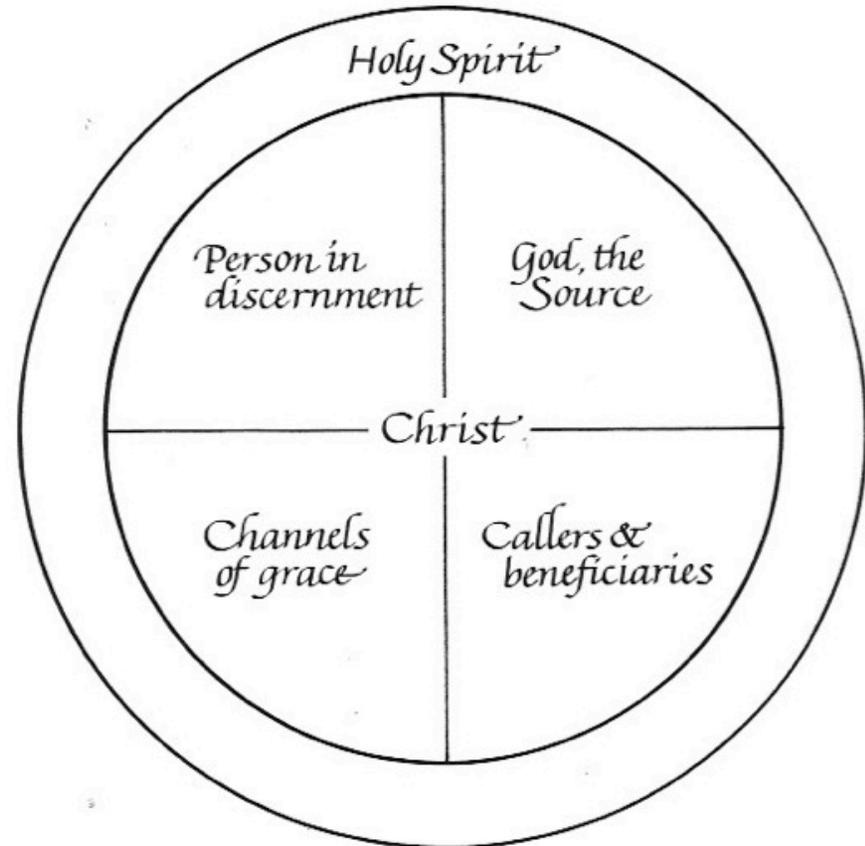


God, the Source

It might look as though the Trinity is splintered into three parts of the vocation circle, but the whole circle is really only one reality.

God is all over the circle: as the source of our lives and our callings; as the Holy Spirit who inspires us and guides us in discernment; and as Christ, who gave his life for us.

While God is the source of our vocations, God is also the end, or goal, of our vocations. When we live into our callings, we and others come to know something of God and God's mission.

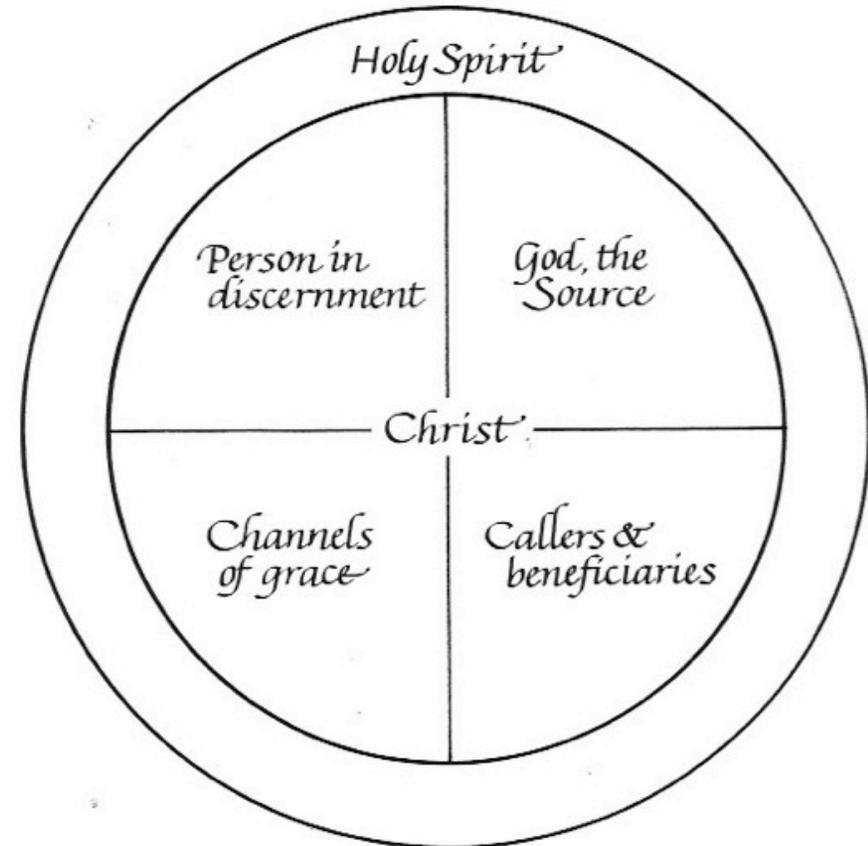


The person in discernment

Each of us has certain givens in our lives. This quadrant of the Vocation Circle helps us think about the relationship between those givens and our callings.

Some of the givens may be things we are grateful for: natural skills and interests or being born in a certain place with particular opportunities.

Other givens may be things we struggle with: experiences of heartbreak or lack of opportunity or simple lack of natural ability in an area.



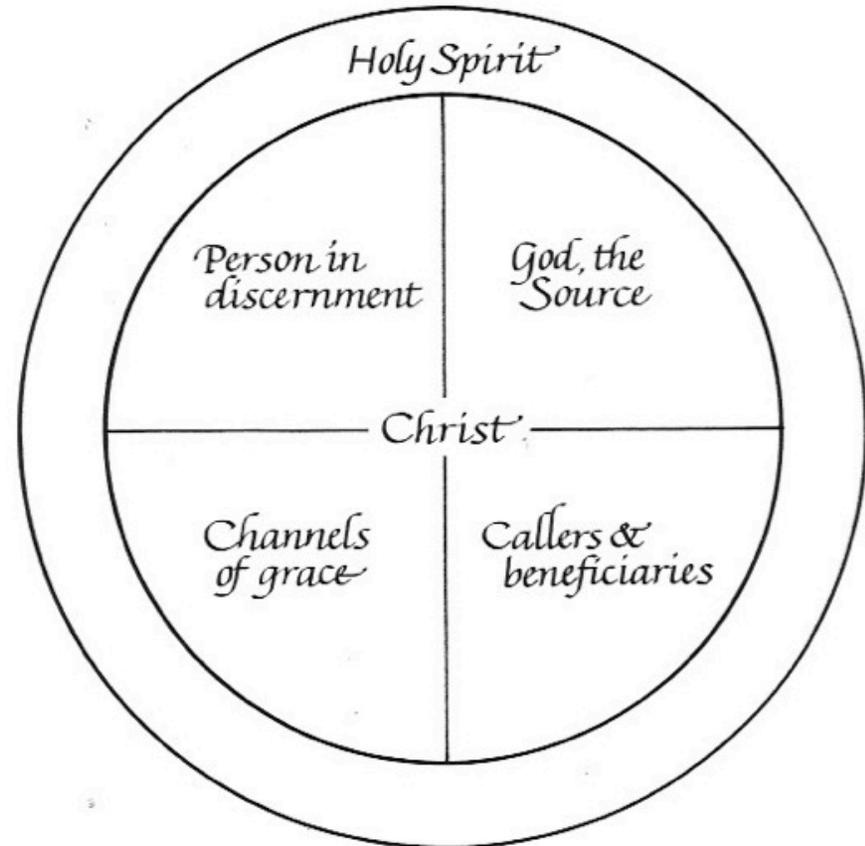
The person in discernment, cont'd.

God uses absolutely everything about us in our callings as a way of drawing into the fullness of our creation.

Only God knows us fully; even we ourselves do not know ourselves completely. There is a transcendent dimension to the self.

This strange unknowability of the self is why personality tests and "spiritual gifts" inventories are so valued by many people. It's hard simply to name our "gifts," as though they were visible facts.

While these tests always need some interpretation, they do give people something to be in conversation with as they try to discern their particular place in God's mission.



Channels of Grace

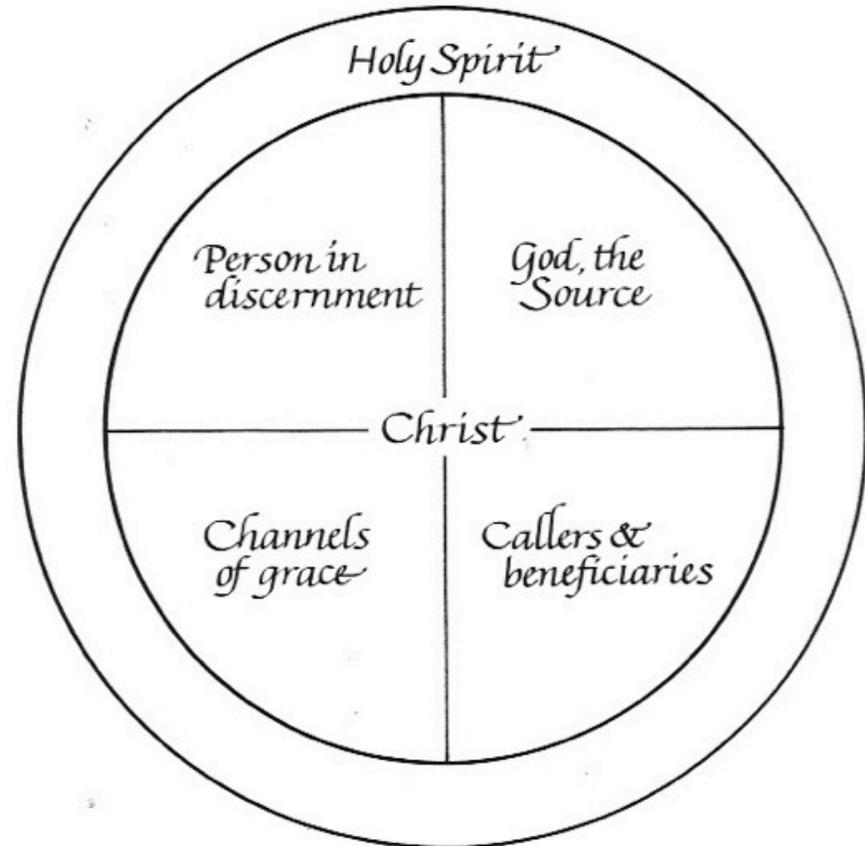
In responding to our callings from God, we have a chance to become a channel of God's grace for others and for the world God loves.

In earlier versions of this circle, I have called this quadrant "instruments of vocation," because the channels of grace are often quite simply the tools of our callings: a surgeon's implements, a carpenter's plane, etc.

But other channels of vocational grace are invisible: a teacher's knowledge, a parent's growing patience, a nurse's skill and compassion.

The word "channel" is important here: we learn over time to position ourselves inwardly and outwardly as conduits of God's grace for others.

This is an area in which we have some control, as we can grow in the skills, dispositions, and virtues of our callings.



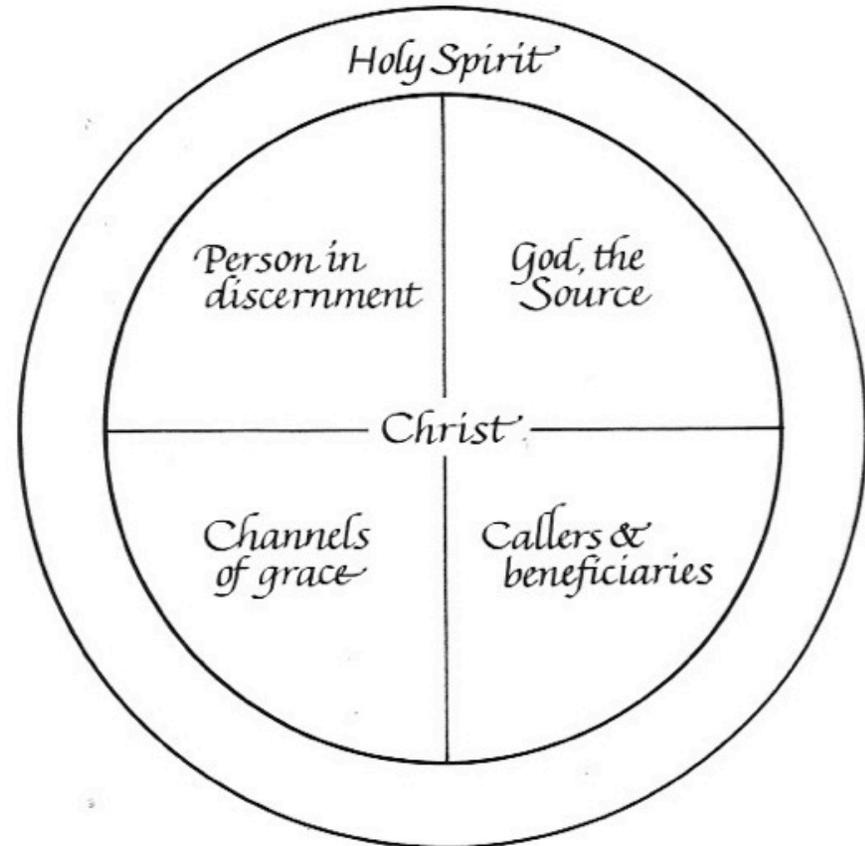
Callers & Beneficiaries

This quadrant consists of all the people who have evoked your callings and who benefit from them.

This may be the most important quadrant for discernment, because you have a chance to see the effects of grace flowing through you to others – or not.

However, this is an area where your control is very limited. You cannot force others to recognize or appreciate what you think is your calling. But they may also, for reasons of their own, not recognize a valid calling.

Still, as you work to hone the instruments of your callings, those whose needs you are responding to are an important source of validation: are they flourishing? Are they experiencing God's grace through something you did or a situation you helped to create?



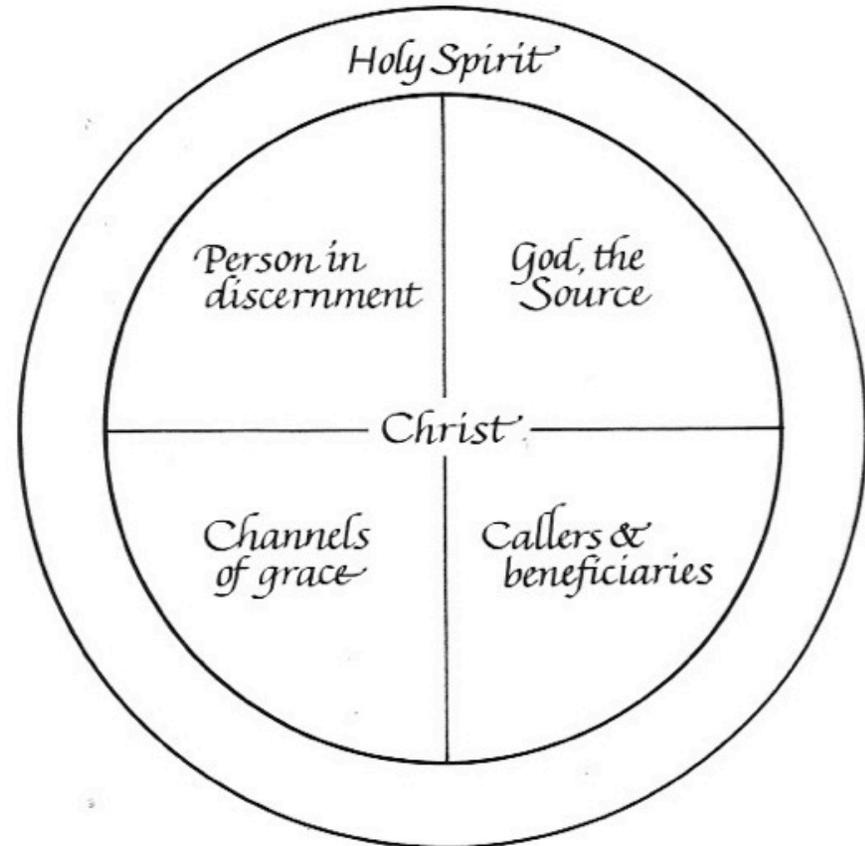
Christ

Christ is at the center of the circle, in the arms of the cross that touch all aspects of the circle.

It is Paul's understanding of Christ (esp. Phil 2:5-11) that lies behind this placement in the Vocation Circle: the one with all power and authority pours it out for the well-being of others.

Paul's understanding of Christ's self-offering for the life of the world is a reminder that our most significant vocations will always entail some obligations, responsibilities, and suffering.

But it is equally important to analyze the power-dynamics in a given situation. Who has status and authority? Who does not? What is your particular placement in a given situation? Sometimes you may be called not to empty yourself, but to stand your ground for the sake of God's justice.



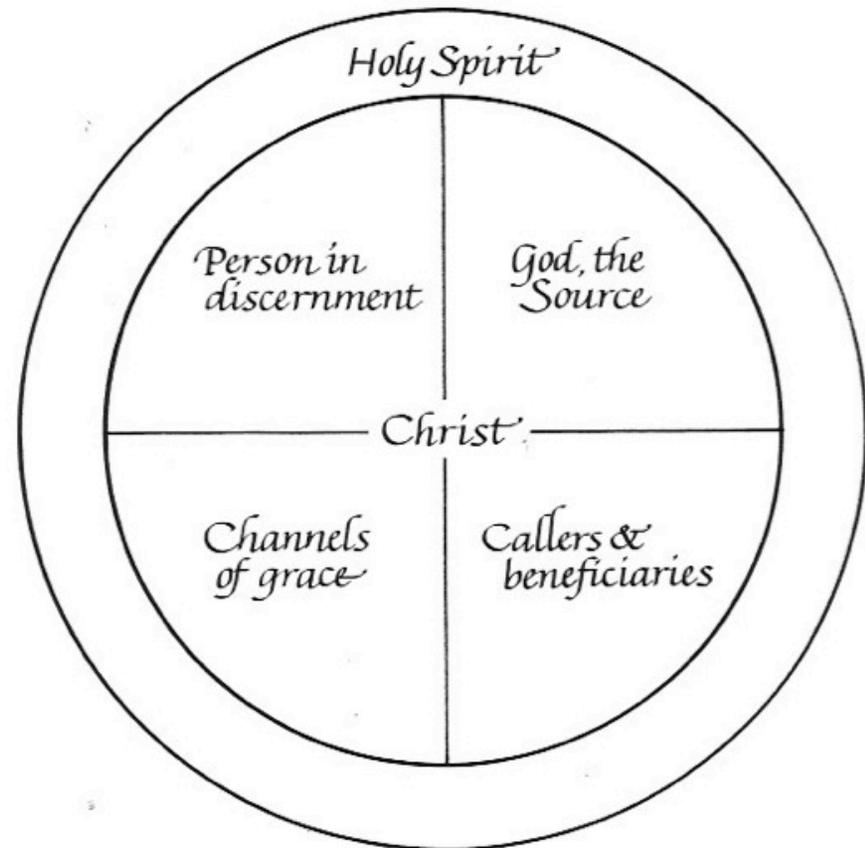
Holy Spirit

Like Christ, the Holy Spirit touches all aspects of the circle.

In Paul's letters, the Spirit is recognized in two ways: as a source of energy and inspiration, and as a power in discernment.

Christ and the Spirit are powerfully present when people gather together and engage in important conversations.

While so much of the life of God is unknowable by humans, Christ and the Spirit can become recognizable over time as people discern the flow of grace, decision by decision, action by action. Even the thoroughly transcendent aspect of God is known in times of awe and wonder and thanksgiving.



God, the End

The whole Vocation Circle is a chance to come to know God in the details of our daily lives.

To accept that God is calling us exactly as we are, moment by moment, and to discern the movement of God by tracking the flow of grace through our own and others' callings, is to come to know what Matthew calls: "Emmanuel, God-with-us."

As we work with the instruments of our own vocations (learning, practicing, failing, starting over) and attend to the flow of God's grace, we develop a daily sense of partnership in God's mission.

And as we respond to needs of the people who have evoked and named our callings, they also come to know something of the grace of God, whether they have that word for it or not.

In all the ups and downs of our callings, we come to know ourselves within the deeper knowledge of God.



Playing with the model

- I invite you to play with the model, using all kinds of different callings.
- How does it play out if the person in discernment is a parent, or a firefighter, or a clerk in a store, or a person on jury duty?
- Notice that the work a person does is often a very small calling in relation to the major relational callings of their lives. When is work just a means of support for more important callings? Notice the times that there is a calling inside of a person's work that isn't exactly the work itself.
- Think of someone who has lost a job unfairly, or who has become disabled in a way that ends some callings. How do you see vocation continuing?

Playing, cont'd.

- Think about the vocations of very young children or the very elderly. There are times in our lives when we live very powerfully in the “callers & beneficiaries” quadrant, evoking the callings of others while either too young or too old to care for ourselves. When we are in school, we are very active in the “channels of grace” quadrant, as we learn to use our aptitudes and interests with greater skill and discipline. Callers & beneficiaries powerfully call forth the callings of others, and are thus powerful instruments of God’s work in the world.
- The model can also be used for thinking about the callings of a congregation, or of a couple or a family or other group.
- Think of a time when an important calling ended for you. In retrospect, how did the various parts of the vocation circle come into play? What was the hardest part of your discernment?
- Finally, think of all the people who have evoked, received, or named your vocation, and give thanks for them. They have been channels of grace for you.

Seeing it whole...

The vocation circle enables us to see with our own eyes something that is normally just an idea:

- that we are all deeply connected
- that the creation is a single fabric composed of the steady warp of God's love continuously interacting with the weft of our callings as we trace the patterns of divine grace.