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Understanding the Vocation of Health Professionals

AN HONORS THESIS

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for All College Honors

and Distinction in the Department of Theology

by

Laura Hey & Kate Nowakowski

April, 2013

PROJECT TITLE: Understanding the Vocation of Health Professionals

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Introduction

“Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I tell my life what to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.”¹ The author, Parker Palmer, gives an interesting insight to how vocation works in our lives. Despite the many definitions and insights on vocation, we all struggle to define what exactly that word means in our own situations. It can be difficult to determine how it fits within each element of who we are, as well as very difficult to discover. Outside influences can alter our perception, for “we listen for guidance everywhere except from within.”² With all of these different understandings and definitions of vocation, we desired to talk with physicians and dentists to find out how they viewed vocation in their specific careers. These individuals are the ones closest to their work and understand it best: “Those who are closest to your work are in the best position to determine what vocation means for their work.”³ We also wanted to know what it was about this specific career path that got in the way of fulfillment, and what physicians and dentists could do to reestablish that drive. First, we will summarize the general idea of vocation and what historical sources have said about dentistry and medicine, specifically in terms of vocation. Then, we will discuss our method for interviewing doctors and dentists, and compare our findings to several theological sources.

In simplest terms, “the word ‘vocation’ comes from the Latin word *vocare* which means to call.”⁴ In addition to Palmer, we have also found vocation to be defined in four ways: as a

¹ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004), 152.

⁴ Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 27.

calling to a certain career; as the integration of every aspect of life; the baptismal call to spread the Gospel; and a relational claim to love others. First of all, vocation has often been associated with a career path chosen for one's life. Before the Middle Ages, vocation only referred to those who entered into the religious life. This meant "this call was seen as somehow 'better' or 'more perfect' than the call to single or married life."⁵ But during the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther changed the way theologians looked at the term vocation. "Martin Luther's teaching on the priesthood of all believers emphasizes that each Christian has a vocation, a calling, by virtue of their standing or office in the world."⁶ This new understanding of vocation gave every Christian outside of the religious a chance to receive a call by God and "contribute to building up the kingdom."⁷ This call to a specific form of work is also realized through gifts and talents that all people receive from God. "It (vocation) refers to the particularity of our callings, the way each person is summoned by God to live faithfully given their talents, gifts, and circumstances."⁸

Despite the emphases of work defining one's vocation, "it is too narrow to claim that work for employment is the only legitimate way to define vocation as service."⁹ Vocation also defines who we are in a broader sense, such as a mother, brother, or friend. As relational beings, we are called to be in relationship with one another, and this is how our vocations evolve throughout the years. It is integrated in each part of our lives, and all of who we are. Again, "Luther was also able to see that vocation implies relationship and service to others in all parts of life."¹⁰ For example, Martin and Langford include spouse and parent in their book *Professions*

⁵ James Martin and Jeremy Langford, *Professions of Faith: Living and Working As a Catholic* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2002), xiii.

⁶ Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 27.

⁷ Martin and Langford, *Professions of Faith: Living and Working As a Catholic*, xiv.

⁸ Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

of Faith: Living and Working as a Catholic. Two individuals were asked to reflect on their “job” as a wife and father respectively. Vocation, therefore, cannot simply be defined by one’s form of work, because there are many more relational elements to our individual callings.

Vocation has also been defined by our baptismal vow to continue Christ’s ministry here on earth. Baptism itself is communal in the way it initiates us into the light of God as a follower of Christ. “Baptism initiates us into the way of discipleship, a journey that demands the whole self for one’s whole life.”¹¹ By becoming disciples of Christ, one agrees to continue the work that he once did and called us to continue after his sacrificial death. This vocational service is very important, “for the ultimate theological basis of ministry lies in the ministry of Christ, who came ‘not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45).”¹² This service can come in many forms, whether it is replicating Christ’s healing, kindness, or love.

Lastly, vocation can be defined through that love that Christ calls us to do, for it is “quite simply a function of Christian love.”¹³ Our vocation is not simply given by God; it requires a response on our part. In the Gospel, Jesus gives us two primary commandments for living: loving God and loving one’s neighbor. Part of our vocation as followers of Christ is to live out these specific commands. Our vocation “compels us to work for the good of others in love, to be selfless for the sake of the neighbor for whom Christ died.”¹⁴ This relates to our call to be in community with one another; we are called to love within that community just as God loves us individually.

¹¹ Ibid., 26.

¹² Gary D. Badcock, *The Way of Life* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 95-96.

¹³ Ibid., 38.

¹⁴ Ibid., 39.

Health professionals themselves have a very specified call just like any vocation. So far, many sources have described physicians and dentists feeling a strong link between their healing and Jesus' healing. Dr. Daniel Sulmasy states, "Christians do not heal by any power they possess, but by virtue of their need to share with others the good news they have heard, announced by Jesus."¹⁵ However, there has also been mention of difficulties faced in these careers. The doctor writing in Martin and Langford's book shares: "In my weekly house calls to a patient dying of cancer, I struggle with my own crisis of faith."¹⁶ Health care professionals may find that "your work may often be apparently worthless, and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect."¹⁷ Vocational examples on health care, despite these examples, are scarce and few. Because of this lack of information, we are looking to help fill this void with our research.

Sample and Methods

Participant Sampling

We interviewed 24 College of St. Benedict/St. John's University alumni currently practicing health care in Minnesota: 10 dentists and 14 physicians. Alumni were selected due to the availability of their contact information. These professionals practice throughout Minnesota, some in small towns, others in large, metropolitan areas. We selected interviewees with different years of experience, fairly evenly distributed into five groups: current students/residents and those practicing for up to 10, 20, 30, and 40 years. Most of the interviewees were Catholic (63%), however the sample also included Lutherans (17%), Episcopalians (8%), non-affiliated

¹⁵ Daniel P. Sulmasy, *A Balm for Gilead: Meditations on Spirituality and the Healing Arts* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 26.

¹⁶ Martin and Langford, *Professions of Faith: Living and Working As a Catholic*, 169.

¹⁷ Sulmasy, *A Balm for Gilead: Meditations on Spirituality and the Healing Arts*, 16.

persons (8%), and a Baptist (4%). Almost all the participants actively practiced their religion (92%) and an equal number said they were spiritual people (92%). The sample included men (58%) and women (42%).

Procedures and Analysis

We emailed information about our research to 77 physician and dentist alumni. Interested professionals emailed back to schedule an interview at their convenience. We conducted semi-structured interviews of 45-60 minutes over the phone using an interview guide (See Appendix A for the interview guide). The interview questions focused on respondents' knowledge about and experience of five topics: (1) understanding of vocation, (2) vocational fulfillment, (3) change in understanding of vocation, (4) obstacles to vocational fulfillment, and (5) promotion of vocational fulfillment. We took notes during the interview, compiled the data, and summarized our findings in this paper. The pre-dentistry author (Hey) interviewed the dentists and analyzed that data, while the pre-medicine author (Nowakowski) did the same with the physicians.

Understanding of Vocation

The first section of the interview sought to identify how dentists and physicians understand vocation and their work. Respondents were asked to describe their work and how they ended up in their positions. We wanted to know whether they defined their work as a job, career or profession and why. We also wanted to know how they defined the term "vocation".

Dentists

Most dentists have an understanding of what the word “vocation” means. Those early in the field felt a sense of excitement, development, and learning. The two females currently attending dental school were very enthusiastic about their current work. However, the middle groups seem to have hit a lull in their work. They found it redundant, tiring, and challenging. This trend did not hold true as the years progress, because those who had been in practice for twenty plus years had much more optimistic adjectives to describe their current work. For example, they used words like fulfilling, enjoyable, and satisfying. Among the dentists interviewed, it seems that they feel a strong sense of calling as they begin the process, fall into a rut toward the middle of their work, and then reestablish that fulfillment in later years.

There were many reasons why these individuals chose dentistry as their occupation. Surprisingly, it was very rare that individuals chose this work for the financial stability and prestige. A couple interviewees felt drawn to this occupation because members of their families had done it before them. They saw how worthwhile this career was for other kin, so they desired it for themselves as well. Most individuals chose this career path because they felt drawn to dentistry itself or they had life experiences that influenced their decision. Some experienced it through a love for the sciences, receiving the gifts necessary for the field of dentistry, and feeling consolation when shadowing others already in the field. One dentist experienced a calling from a medical mission trip to Mexico. Another felt a pull toward this field while in the army. Someone had a poor experience at the dentist as a child, and someone else had a moving experience at the dentist as a child. The interviewees had reasons that were across the board to become a dentist, but most of the reasons were centered on a desire to serve others that came primarily from their personal experiences.

When asked whether they thought their work was a job, career, or profession, most of the dentists interviewed said they used the word “career.” Most of the dentists were inclined to use that word over the others because it was his or her way to make a living. This is what they do day in and day out that gives them the ability to support a family. Many of them also call it a career because they feel that it is something that takes up most of their lives but not all of it. Being a dentist only represents a portion of who they are as a person. That work, in their mind, is only a piece of what they do. However, there was one dentist who was intrigued by the word “profession.” He mentioned that he previously considered dentistry his career, but agreed with calling it a profession after hearing it in this conversation. *“Work should say something about who you are, not just what you do”* he had said.

This interviewee was not the only one who considered dentistry his profession as opposed to career or job. Three of the ten subjects resonated with the word “profession.” Those who related more to profession seemed to feel that their work was also a part of who they are as an individual. They most often used phrases like, *“My work should profess who I am as a person.”* These individuals felt that their work was a part of who they are and not just an outside component. One dentist even hoped that her career professed who she was as a follower of Christ. It can be inferred that some people will understand their work as something that professes who they are as a person.

Some common themes can be noticed across the board for all of the dentists when they attempted to define what they profess by the work they do as a dentist. The first adjective that most of them seemed to use was hardworking or driven. Many of these dentists hope that others will see their determination and dedication by participating in this work throughout their lives. Many of the subjects also hope that their work shows something positive about their character.

Individuals hope that their work shows that they are very caring persons. In addition to being caring, they hope to be considered thoughtful and have a passion to serve others. Overall, it seems that many of the dentists interviewed wanted others to see how much they care about others through their work. However, only one individual desired to profess that she is a Christian through her work.

Also, the actual word “vocation” was brought into the discussion. Dentists were asked what their understanding of this word was, and every single dentist associated this word with God’s calling. Vocation is a specific calling that God has for one’s life. Each person also believed that it was individualized based on who one is as a person. Most of the dentists understood vocation as deeper than just work or occupation. They associated the word with every part of their lives. Indeed God called them to be a dentist, but He also called them to be a mother or father, son or daughter, friend, and a part of a faith community. All of the dentists, no matter what age, seemed to have a very deep understanding of the word “vocation.”

Physicians

Physicians described their work using a variety of terms. Some detailed the actual work they performed, while others commented on how their work made them feel. The most common description, which seven of fourteen physicians used, was “caring for patients.” Three physicians also mentioned the busy, and sometimes overwhelming, nature of their work. Two physicians, both in practice for 30 years or more, said their work was frustrating at times. Other descriptions included challenging and fulfilling.

The path physicians took into medicine varied as well. Six physicians, five of whom were in practice for 20 years or more, knew in high school or before that they wanted to be

doctors. *“As a ten to twelve year old, I knew [that I wanted to be a doctor].” “I decided [to be a doctor] at sixteen, in high school. I was a pretty good student and enjoyed science... I thought it would be a good fit.”* On the other hand, five physicians, three of whom were in practice for less than 20 years, experienced uncertainty in college about what future path to take and did not decide on medicine until late in college or after graduation. *“At SJU, I was going to be a history major, then a psychologist. I had to take chemistry, found I liked science, and started thinking about medical school.” “At SJU I was a history major... I went to France for a year to do social work, came back and met a group of students doing pre-med post-graduate work. It was then that medicine became a serious consideration.”*

Almost all physicians chose to define their work as a “profession,” though in different capacities. Seven physicians said they thought of their work exclusively as a profession. Two physicians said they thought of it as a career and profession. Two physicians, both practicing in public contexts, said it depended on the day. All the physicians shared some commonalities in their definitions of profession. Four physicians said it was a calling, two mentioned the work was about more than a paycheck, two said it was a cause they shared with their colleagues and two noted involvement of a mission or obligation.

One fascinating theme was the concept of work and identity. Four physicians spoke about doctoring as part of who they are. *“It’s who I am, not what I do.” It’s not a job, but... something you take with you and carry it. It doesn’t leave when business hours end.”* These physicians do not see their work as a means to an end, but as an intricate part of themselves. Their work does not cease when outside of the clinic or hospital. Being a doctor, for them, is about caring for others wherever and whenever called upon. However, this is not true of all physicians. Some, in

an admirable effort to balance work life and personal life, feel doctoring is something they do, not something they are.

The physicians were generally uncertain about what exactly their work said about themselves. Four physicians said their work conveyed their commitment and hard work. *“You do to the best of your ability- work hard and meet deadlines.”* Four physicians hoped they expressed a sense of genuine care for those around them. *“That I show care for people, including: patients, colleagues, nurses, families and therapists.”* Three physicians also mentioned their desire to be seen as the best, or high achieving. *“That I have high standards. I do everything excellent (not perfect), because ok is unacceptable.”*

Nine of fourteen physicians interviewed defined vocation as a sense of calling. However, this calling was not necessarily religious. Only four of those physicians, three of whom were female, referenced God as the source of a calling. *“God has no hands, but our hands. It [vocation] is the small voice that intersects my gifts and talents with God’s hands and feet.”* *“God provides the direction for life.”* The other half, four of whom were male, seemed to use calling in a more general sense, referencing physician-hood as part of who they are or a lifelong commitment. *“Place where talents meet the needs of the world.” It is something that takes time, commitment, and education. Lifelong.”*

Interestingly, physicians in practice for over twenty years provided rather simplistic definitions of vocation. They commonly described vocation as a “calling”, and did not say much else. Alternatively, those with less than twenty years of practice defined vocation by describing the joy one should feel in the work, the needs the work should meet and the talents it should utilize.

Fulfillment of Vocation

The next section of the interview elaborated on what it was about medicine that made each individual feel fulfilled. We wanted to know if professionals applied their understanding of vocation to their work. We also wanted to know if professionals brought together their faith and work or, at the very least, thought about it.

Dentists

First, all of the dentists experienced a sense of meaning at work when serving their patients. Also, the interviewees felt that their calling was very personal, and specific to who they are. They felt that their work brought out their gifts and talents as well as enjoyment and energy. Many dentists also relate their vocation to the work of Jesus by way of service, healing, and love. The oldest group of individuals who were at the end of their career or retired felt the most fulfillment in what they had done. Most of the other groups felt that sense of fulfillment, but agreed that it was still changing and growing as time goes on. The only group that was lacking a sense of fulfillment at the time was the 10-20 year group. They thought this was because the work was getting redundant and repetitive.

Dentists seem to feel a sense of meaning at work under the common theme of serving their patients. Every dentist interviewed found a sense of meaning when they were taking care of patients. Feelings of fulfillment are most present when patients also feel content with the care they have been given. One of the favorite parts of their job is getting to interact with so many people. Getting to know their patients and staff is what makes them tick and fall in love with their occupation. As one dentist put it, *“Helping my patients and caring for others puts meaning*

into my work day in and day out.” The dentists strive to make others happy by giving them quality care, and this is when they find the most fulfillment with the occupation they are in.

It has been said by Stephen Rosen and Celia Paul that, “A calling is unique, requires more than a desire, gives a sense of energy and enjoyment, and isn’t easy to discover.”¹⁸ This quote resonated well with many of the dentists. Each dentist felt that they were called in a way that was very specific to them personally. Most of the dentists were drawn to the career for different reasons and contributing life experiences. Also, many of them felt that their calling included much more than a desire. For example, one dentist mentioned that skills and gifts were a part of it as well. This means that not just anyone can be a dentist – there are factors other than a simple passion to become one. For the most part, the dentists felt enjoyment and energy when in their calling. The only two dentists that felt as though they had lost enjoyment were the dentists practicing for 10-20 years. One particular female stated, “*I feel like I am in a rut with my call.*” The individuals who have been practicing longer than 20 years seem to have reestablished that enjoyment and energy. Dentists, for the most part, truly enjoy doing what they do everyday. Lastly, only a couple of the dentists knew their calling right away in their lives. This means that many of the dentists agreed that this calling was not something easy to discover. It took many of them years of discernment, experience, and research to discover this career.

Similarly defined, Father Michael Himes says that a vocation should be a source of joy, engage your gifts and talents in the fullest way possible and genuinely serve the people around you.¹⁹ All of the dentists said that their gifts and talents led them into their work somehow. Some specifically said that God gave them these particular gifts for this exact vocation.

¹⁸ Stephen Rosen and Celia Paul, *Career Renewal: Tools for Scientists and Technical Professionals* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1998), 108.

¹⁹ Rev. Michael Himes, "Three Key Questions," Lecture, <http://www.visitationmonasteryminneapolis.org/2010/02/on-discernment-three-key-questions/>.

According to several of them, specific skills are needed to be a dentist, such as intelligence, dexterity, and generosity. All of the dentists again emphasized their opportunity to serve in this career. This shows that service is the key to making a dentist feel fulfilled in his or her vocation.

Some would also say that a vocation is being fulfilled when continuing Jesus' ministry. All of the dentists agreed that their work continued Jesus' work in three ways. Many of them mention that Christ served many people, so dentistry is a great way to continue this service. Christ also was a healer, and dentists get the opportunity to heal and care for their patients. It also is a way for them to show Jesus' love for all people. He cared for others deeply and brought passion in to all He did. The dentists feel this same passion in their specific calling. Dentists seem to identify strongly with continuing Jesus' ministry on earth.

Many dentists feel that their vocation is still changing and morphing as they progress through their career. The dental school students interviewed had a hard time answering this question. They felt that it was too early to determine, but felt a lot of promise moving forward. The farther into their career they get, the more fulfilled they feel. Again, those dentists in the 10-20 year range felt less fulfillment than the other groups. They said that they felt this was because the work was getting redundant and dull. Their careers were no longer new and exciting. However, they did mention that they still felt promise in their vocation. Both individuals hoped that, moving forward, their work would get back on track and their feelings of fulfillment would be present once again. Individuals toward the end of their careers or who are finished felt the most sense of fulfillment. They felt like they were in the right place and in the right career.

Physicians

The most frequent place physicians found meaning was in their relationships. Six physicians felt that relationships or that sort of deep personal connection were very meaningful. *“I find meaning in the relational moments... learning and communicating with the family and learning from patients.” Interpersonal relationships- finding out about them [patients].”* Interestingly, five of the six physicians who mentioned relationships as a source of meaning practiced in the private sector. Other experiences of meaning included a patient getting well, guiding someone through the dying process, receiving thanks for their services, providing a diagnosis, providing education, delivering a baby, and making a difference. One interesting note is the frequency with which physicians experienced a sense of meaning at work. They vary from “day to day,” to “more often than not,” to “continually,” to “always.” Though physicians clearly experience a sense of meaning at work, the consistency with which this is experienced is not constant.

We provided Stephen Rosen and Celia Paul’s definition of calling to interviewees: “a calling is unique, requires more than desire, gives a sense of energy and enjoyment, and it isn’t easy to discover.”²⁰ Physicians were asked if this described their life. Their responses usually commented on each of the four aspects of the given definition independently. The response to the idea that a calling is unique was quite varied. Some felt that a calling was “not really” unique, while others said it was “*unique to me as a person*” or “*not everyone is called to practice the same way.*”

All 14 physicians felt that their calling required more than desire, however, how much more and what exactly in addition to desire it required varied. Six physicians mentioned the

²⁰ Stephen Rosen and Celia Paul, *Career Renewal: Tools for Scientists and Technical Professionals* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1998), 108.

necessary work and effort for calling in medicine. Four of these six physicians were females. Four physicians spoke about the need for self-reflection and of these, three physicians were females and three practiced in a public setting. Four physicians, all in practice for more than 20 years, also spoke about the need for energy in order to practice medicine. Two physicians, both in practice for less than ten years, mentioned the sacrifice medicine entailed.

Most physicians, 10 of 14, commented on the sense of energy and enjoyment they received from their work. Physicians found their work difficult, but invigorating and energizing. One physician, in practice for over 40 years, put it this way, *“you have two things to decide as a person in charge of a finite amount of energy. You can either let other people suck it away or not. If you are left with more energy after doing something, then you should continue. If not, then disengage.”* Many took their sense of enjoyment from direct patient care and the ability that gave them to connect with others and grow with them. Several physicians who had been in practice for 30 years or more, mentioned that enjoyment does not come until later in professional life. Two quotes in particular stand out. Both physicians talk about the sense of enjoyment in a very particular way. *“Most times, you do something and get tired and stressed. If it’s a calling, you get stuff out of it, it inspires you.”* *What makes your heart smile is your calling.”*

Comments on the ease of discovering vocation were fascinating. Some felt a calling was not easy to discover, while others felt it was right in front of them. How easy it was to discover their calling seemed to vary by age. All five of those physicians who said a calling was not easy to discover had been in practice for 20 years or less. The women who had practiced for 20 years or more said a calling took time and experience to find and recognize. The men in practice for 20 years or more said their callings were not difficult to discover. Three female physicians spoke about the discovery of their callings as a process or journey. *“Definitely a journey to discover.*

Takes quite a long time.” Two male physicians mentioned that the hardest part is being open to your calling. *“You have to uncover that [vocation] from expectations and financial pressure. Letting your vocation come to the forefront is hard.”*

We also provided a definition of vocation from Rev. Michael Himes: “a vocation should be a source of joy, engage your gifts and talents in the fullest way possible, and genuinely serve the people around you.”²¹ Again, we asked physicians, does this describe your work? Most physicians agreed to all three components of this definition, though some noted nuances. Two male physicians, both in practice for less than 20 years, mentioned they would have preferred terms such as engaging or fulfilling instead of joy. They said that joy was inaccurate because the work they do is not always fun. *“Joy is a little inaccurate. I’d say engaging because the work I do is not always fun. I had a six year old with a limp and later brain cancer and somebody has got to take care of him. There’s no joy in that, but I have to show stability and empathy because the family needs me.”* Three physicians mentioned that no job was perfect and this definition of vocation did not always ring true in their work. One physician commented, *“I’m satisfied that occasionally life feels this way.”* Two physicians, both in practice for 40 years or more, mentioned that vocation could not be recognized initially. *“It has to be developed you are not born with it.” “You don’t recognize and can’t appreciate your vocation initially.”*

We asked physicians if and how they viewed their work as a continuation of Jesus’ ministry. Answers ranged from *“absolutely”* to *“not explicitly, but yes.”* Eight physicians drew parallels between Jesus’ service to others and their service to patients. Three physicians, all in practice for less than twenty years, mentioned a connection between them and Jesus as ultimate physician and healer. *“Jesus Christ was the ultimate physician- the way he taught and healed the*

²¹ Rev. Michael Himes, "Three Key Questions," Lecture, <http://www.visitationmonasteryminneapolis.org/2010/02/on-discernment-three-key-questions/>.

sick and was present.” Five physicians, again all in practice for less than 20 years, also drew parallels between Jesus’ nonjudgmental and accepting manner and their principle of not turning patients away and not judging their patients. Two physicians mentioned a discontinuity with Christ’s ministry in that they are paid for their services. *“It is not a free gift as perhaps true ministry is.”*

Overall, physicians feel fulfilled in their vocation. Ten of 14 physicians said “yes” they are fulfilled, two said they feel mostly fulfilled, and two said they thought or hoped they were fulfilled. Two female physicians, in practice for 20 to 30 years, mentioned times when they felt they should be doing something more. *“There are times when I think I should do something about bigger policy issues, and then I would be more fulfilled.”* *Sometimes I think more mission work or more work in poverty would fulfill me more, but given my family and other circumstances I am as fulfilled as I can be.”*

Change in Understanding of Vocation

In addition to current vocational fulfillment, we wanted to know if professionals understood and applied the concept of vocation in their past. We wanted to know if they had a past concept of vocation and whether or not that had changed since then. We also wanted to know what caused that change. Furthermore, we wanted to know if dentists and physicians used the concept of vocation in discerning their career.

Dentists

Most people in the work force would find that their careers change and evolve through time. The more one is in a career, the more one learns and grows. The dentists interviewed

coincide with this notion. They also discovered that their vocation included so much more than just dentistry. All of them could easily say that their vocation has changed over time, even those who discovered their careers early on in their lives. The dentists who didn't fall in to this career easily found it through many different ways. These methods of discovery were volunteer experiences, educational experiences, and life experiences. These individuals all felt that their career was in a good spot, but could recognize that they might feel more clarification the farther into the career they get.

It is easy to say that many of the dentists felt their vocation change over time, but many of them saw that change in different ways. For example, a few of the dentists knew from the beginning that this was the right career for them. Others were not as sure, saying that they came into the career fairly uncertain if this was the right thing for them to pursue. For those who were apprehensive from the beginning, they felt that their decision solidified over time. All of the dentists claimed that there was much to learn as the years went on. The farther each individual got in their career, the more they understood what it means to be a dentist. Most of the dentists also mentioned that they learned throughout the years that their vocation was more than dentistry. One individual noted, *"I have come to realize that it is more than my work itself; it is who I am to others in all parts of my life. Vocation is not my only job, because I am also a dad, son, and husband."*

Around half of the dentists mentioned knowing they were called to dentistry almost their entire lives. Many of these families grew up with a parent as a dentist, which they claimed to be a major influence bringing them into the career. Others who knew this fact early on said they had childhood experiences lead them into the career. For example, one dentist's family had an awful experience at the endodontist when he was only a child. This motivated him to work toward that

career his entire life. It took these dentists different life experiences and education to solidify their calling into dentistry, but all of these individuals felt they were on the right path immediately.

The other half of dentists did not feel this path as their calling until much later in their lives. As mentioned earlier, this is the group that came into dentistry with some uncertainty. Over time, however, each of these individuals has felt their path change. These reasons for change ended up being very different. First of all, some people discovered dentistry through volunteer work. One individual did volunteer work in Mexico, which included building, cooking, cleaning, and different forms of health care. This dentist found the dental work to line up perfectly with his interests. It was the ideal way for him to serve others and use his gifts and talents at the same time. Another dentist found this work through volunteering with the army. Like the previous individual, the army offered a variety of ways to volunteer and serve others. This form of work was what really spiked his interest the most.

A couple mentioned finding this path from their educational background throughout high school and college. They really enjoyed the science classes they were a part of in high school, which led them to take these courses in college. After exploring the different careers that would coincide with a science major, both of these dentists decided to shadow different health careers. They both mentioned feeling very excited about the thought of dentistry after shadowing. This got them excited about the career, and inspired them to apply to dental school.

Life experience also shaped two other individuals, but these experiences occurred later in young adulthood, making their career choice a last-minute decision. One dentist had the ambition to be a teacher from the very beginning. His parents forced him into dentistry, because it was a steady career that would make a lot more money. This individual mentioned being upset at the

time, because he really thought that teaching was his strongest desire. He now sees that God was working in this hindrance, because the career ended up being perfect. The other dentist had his front teeth knocked out playing hockey in college. The oral surgeon who fixed his teeth gave him quality, kind care and made it a great experience. Thanks to his wonderful treatment, this individual wanted to explore dentistry. These reasons may be different, but each reason gave the dentists feelings of consolation that they did indeed select the right form of work for their lives.

Most of the dentists now acknowledge that they are in the right place. They can say that their careers are everything they thought they would be, but every single one of them recognizes that their careers are still changing. As mentioned before, each individual sees that their vocation solidifies the more they work and the more they learn. The two females in dental school find this as more of a hopeful concept. So far, they feel like they are in the right form of work, but they also recognize that they might not be able to say it has been all they hoped it would be until they are closer to retirement. Those at the end of their career could boldly answer that their career had been everything they had hoped it would be. Those who were apprehensive at the start were able to say that it exceeded their expectations. Every one could say with confidence that they were in the right place now, even though there is still much more to learn in the future.

Physicians

The existence of a past concept of vocation was quite varied among physicians. Three physicians, all in practice for 20 years or less, said their definition of vocation was “*pretty similar*” or had not changed over time. Five physicians, four of whom were male, said their concept of vocation had changed. Three of these had no concept of vocation as a young adult, but then developed one in later years. As one interviewee said: “*Vocation was rarely talked*

about in formation.” The other two physicians had a narrow concept of vocation initially, but that broadened later in life. *“Vocation was always associated with religious life in school, but it is much more broad than that.” 30 years ago, vocation did not apply to me.*”

Three physicians, two of who were in practice for 20 years or more, also talked about a change in their concept of vocation, but they phrased it as an ongoing process. They left open the possibility of future changes in their concept of vocation. These physicians also emphasized the continual need for personal searching and reflection in order to understand vocation. *“As we mature, vocation changes. It is a lifelong thing. What inspires me may change.” Vocation definitely changes over time. It becomes more clear, defined, and real. It is not fully defined at the start. It evolves with experience and time and reflective and thoughtful work.” Going through experiences and reflecting on them produces the realization of vocation.*” Two physicians said they still don’t really have a concept of vocation because it’s not something they have thought about. *“I haven’t consciously thought about vocation each step.”*

Interestingly, three physicians, all in practice for 20 years or more, also mentioned the transitory nature of the vocation. They talked about their inability to think about vocation explicitly during training or at the beginning of their practice. *“In the midst of training, the concept of vocation gets lost in busyness.” At the beginning, you’re so busy doing everything.”*

Physicians were also inconsistent in their application of vocation. Six physicians, four of who were in practice for 20 years or less, said they always felt this path as a calling. Three of these physicians, all of whom were female, explicitly mentioned a religious or spiritual aspect to their calling. *“Medicine was always bubbling to the top. It was the constant, quiet nudge I felt the strongest. I felt the calling through a spiritual process of quiet listening and being attentive to what’s beyond the initial thought.”* On the other hand, six physicians said they did not always

feel this path as a calling. Half of this group, all in practice for over 30 years, decided on medicine fairly early in life and did not feel it was a calling until later in practice. *“There was no religious or spiritual component initially. It became more so over time.” It becomes a calling later. It changes with age and experience.*” The other half of this group initially started on a path toward a different career and then changed course to go into medicine. Two physicians said they do not feel their work is a calling. *“Ending up here feels accidental or organic.”* Four physicians, all in practice for 20 years or more, mentioned that once they decided to be a doctor, medicine was always in their mind and they did not have a backup plan. *“My mind was so 24/7 on medicine that I never thought about any other stuff.”*

Physicians were also asked if their careers were everything they thought it they would be. Five physicians, three of whom were in practice for less than 20 years, said “yes and more.” They commonly talked about the beauty of medicine, how much they enjoyed it, and the deep relationships and incredible trust level they experienced. Six physicians, five of whom were in practice for 20 years or more, said “yes and no.” All of these physicians again spoke about their joy in caring for patients. However, they also mentioned unexpected downsides to medicine. Four of these physicians, all in practice for 20 years or more, talked about the business side of medicine. *“One downside that I wasn’t prepared for was the business side of medicine. I came out of residency and had to deal with the business side. I see how business affects those around you.”* Two physicians talked about the busyness of medicine. *“There’s more busyness than I expected or want.”* Two physicians gave unique responses to our question. One interviewee described medicine as simply different than he expected. *“It’s much murkier than I thought. People and illnesses are not hard and fast. I never considered the social issues.”* Another

physician said medicine was not what she expected. *“Making a diagnosis of terminal illness is harder and more weighty than I thought. There are a lot of pressures and emotional things.”*

Obstacles to Vocational Fulfillment

We also spoke with interviewees about obstacles to fulfillment. We wanted to know if there is anything that they felt prevented fulfillment in their work. We also wanted to know when, if at any time, they felt their work was only a way to make a living or seemed to lack meaning.

Dentists

Many of the dentists agreed that there were times when their work seemed to lack meaning. They often associated certain obstacles with those days that did not promote energy or consolation. The types of obstacles that hinder understanding and fulfillment within the field of dentistry depended on how long the individual had been in the field. The two youngest interviewees faced the challenges of rigorous academia as well as the length of dental school. Those in the middle of the career were having difficulties keeping the work exciting and spontaneous. They feel that the work has been tough on them after being in it for so long. Those who had been in the career longer also mentioned that difficult patients can really test patience and a sense of peace day in and day out. Those who are now retired said it was very hard to be fulfilled now that they are done, because it is hard to stop doing something one is so used to doing everyday. Every person interviewed mentioned that the financial benefits of being a dentist could also often get in the way of fulfillment.

The youngest individuals interviewed found the stresses of dental school to be the main obstacle for fulfillment. Both women mentioned that the material they learn in class is very challenging and difficult. One woman stated that, "*The amount of material that we have to study for tests is overwhelming and complex.*" They both were tempted to give up on the career when they struggled academically: "*Every time I make a mistake, I question whether or not I am in the right place.*" Another piece of dental school that can be very hard on a student are the clinicals they go through during third and fourth year. These clinicals allow dental students to practice giving treatment to patients as well as help them decide if they want to specialize within dentistry. Occasionally, students are faced with difficult patients, busy schedules, and tedious assignments. These difficult clinical days can take a toll on the students mentally and physically.

Dentists in the middle of their careers also felt mentally and physically drained after being involved in the work for so long. Dental procedures require meticulous work with the hands and eyes. Many of these dentists said they were simply getting physically tired of doing the work they were doing. Another primary obstacle they faced was the monotonous and repetitive nature of the work at this point in their careers. A lack of spontaneity left these dentists feeling less excitement when they are at work. This notion also made some dentists use the phrase, "*I am just getting tired of doing this work everyday.*" These dentists lastly said that they had many difficult patients that they had to treat throughout the years. One individual explained that, "*It is much more difficult to treat these patients because they can really test one's patience.*" It is much easier to feel fulfilled in the work they do when they enjoy the patients they have, and when those patients seem thankful for the care they received.

Those who are now retired found they could relate to the other groups when they were at that same point in their careers. However, in the retired stage, they now face a different obstacle.

These individuals have had a difficult time settling into the retired life. They had been practicing dentistry for over 30 years, and they say it is very difficult to stop doing something one is so used to. Both of the retired interviewees mention gradually phasing out when they were getting ready to retire. One mentioned how difficult it was to, “*let go of the reins*” and let someone else take over. Their career became a huge part of who they are as a person, so it was tricky knowing what that role looks like as a retired individual.

There was one obstacle that every single age group mentioned that caused them to occasionally lose focus on the true reasons why they are in this career. Dentistry is a very stable, always needed occupation that tends to pay very well. Every single individual mentioned that money could get in the way of the true meaning of the vocation. During the difficult days, one dentist mentioned that, “*The paycheck is what gets me through.*” This contrasts the reasons many of these individuals chose dentistry, which most often was to simply use gifts and talents to serve others. When days get challenging, it is very easy for these individuals to ease their minds by thinking of the money they are making and that leaving this job would sacrifice their monetary security. All of the interviewees recognized this as a problem and a distraction from fulfillment and desired to find a way to motivate themselves differently at work.

Physicians

The most commonly cited obstacle to physician fulfillment was insurance. Seven physicians mentioned this as an obstacle. Of these, five had been in practice for 30 years or less. Many said that determining insurance and figuring out what tests and treatments would be covered by that was a frustrating and timely process. “*Performance is defined in the dictionary as a process of delivering a product. The question in medicine is who is placing the order.*”

Increasingly, the insurance industry is at odds with physicians. Patient corporatization of medicine may have a different idea of what the order is.”

The second most mentioned obstacle was similar. Five physicians talked about the business of medicine as something that prevented fulfillment. Four of these physicians practice in a private setting and three of them have been in practice for 40 years or more. One physician remarked: *“Business is the biggest obstacle. It takes the focus off patients and care and puts it on business.”* Interestingly, all five of those who mentioned business were male. This means that five of the eight males interviewed said business is one of the biggest impediments to their fulfillment.

Another common response was interference by other people. Four physicians, all of whom have been in practice for 30 years or more, claimed a *“lack of control“* or *“loss of autonomy”* as a major frustration in their work. As one physician said: *“The other people that have to be involved drive you nuts.”* These physicians talked about bureaucracy and politics as major obstacles to their fulfillment.

Four of the six female physicians interviewed mentioned exhaustion as an obstacle to fulfillment. One physician said: *“Every month more things are added, there’s another layer. It takes the joy out of my work. And getting everything done for patients is harder. We are often pressured to see more, do more, and be more. Occasionally, it wears you down.”* Another physician talked about not having the time to recharge. *“I’m not taking time to get recharged. Everyone gets exhausted. Priests and others go on retreat to recharge. I need to take time too.”*

Physicians also talked about when, if at all, they experience a lack of meaning at work. Four physicians, three of whom have been in practice for ten years or less, said they never experience a lack of meaning. Eight physicians, six of whom have been in practice for 20 years

or more, said they do experience a lack of meaning at work, though most were quick to mention that this is not a regular experience. Five physicians, four of whom were male, said long hours or a very busy schedule decreased their sense of meaning at work. *“When I’m training and working many hours and doing stuff to pick up the slack I get angry and jaded. But those moments are not every day.” All jobs get tired or repetitive.*” Two physicians, both of whom were males in practice for 5 to 10 years, mentioned that even the long hours and mundane work still had meaning and were *“necessary to understanding and enjoying work.”*

Change to Promote Vocational Fulfillment

In addition to talking about the obstacles experienced by the interviewees, we wanted to know if they had any ideas for how to promote understanding about and fulfillment of vocation. This could apply to them personally or could come in the form of advice for younger professionals experiencing a lack of meaning. We also wondered if there is anything they could do to make their work “more personally satisfying and spiritually enriching.”

Dentists

Dentists found that there were many things they could do to promote fulfillment in their careers as well as focus on what it is that makes work satisfying and enriching. Some of them mention keeping the focus on the patients to sustain fulfillment within their careers. Also, switching up routines was a way for those stuck in redundancy to enjoy their careers once more. Many commented on having peers and colleagues check up on them and give them advice with their troubles. Finally, most of the dentists found comfort and fulfillment within the process of

prayer. Once the dentists used these different methods, they were once again filled with a sense of peace, passion, and fulfillment within their vocations.

First of all, all of the dentists could regain a sense of their vocation through focusing on the welfare of the patients. One dentist mentioned, *“Looking at the patients with the thought in mind that they have Jesus within them reminds me of my purpose to serve.”* Many of the dentists mention earlier that their work is a continuation of Christ’s work through serving others. This fact was a good reminder for them of why they started being a dentist in the first place. They wanted to be a part of this profession because of the way it helped others. Reminding themselves that each patient is a human being who deserves to be loved and provided for is a great way to bring that fulfillment back into their work.

Some of the dentists in the middle of their careers were starting to get bored with the same routines they had each day. One of the dentists told me that he started switching up his routines when he started feeling that his days at work were redundant and repetitive. He said he immediately started feeling that energy and enjoyment come back into his daily routines. Spontaneity and excitement were easy to come by at the beginning of his career, so he is aware that this is something he needs to work on in days to come. The other individuals with this same obstacle were not as sure how to fix the problem. I was able to give this example from the first dentist in the middle of his career to give them some ideas how to switch up their routines and yet again have that rediscovery of fulfillment.

In addition to switching up routines, dentists were able to hang onto their fulfillment in their vocations by building relationships with peers and colleagues. Those in dental school found that having conversations with peers and instructors with what they were having trouble with was very helpful. It was comforting for them to know that others around them were feeling

the same things and going through the same struggles. The older dentists found that they did the same thing with colleagues that they knew in the area or from dental school. They all agreed that it was very helpful to bounce information off of each other and give each other ideas and advice for the tough moments in their careers.

Finally, almost all of the dentists said that diving into their prayer life always helps. Incorporating God into the day is very helpful for one individual. She makes sure to say prayers throughout the day, especially when she is struggling. She looks for God in every person she meets, and often reflects on how her career is a gift from God. A few commented on praying before each day started to get their minds centered on serving others. Remembering that God is at the center of their careers helps these dentists make their career into one of giving to others.

Physicians

Six physicians, four of whom were male, said one way to promote fulfillment is to learn more about vocation. Though a number of physicians mentioned this, the response was very prevalent among those in practice for 10 years or less. Learning could be in the form of having conferences, reading, or attending talks on the topic. One physician who has a defined role in education said: *“My most important role is to teach vocation in medicine. I need to help students uncover the vocations they know.”* Another physician acknowledged the need for vocational education: *“They need to offer opportunities for people to realize their vocation. They need to spend time with seniors.”* Another said: *“Vocation is a critical area of importance for physicians. It has to be addressed in a broad way. Giving group education on vocation is beneficial.”*

Five physicians, all in practice for 20 years or less, talked about the need to set aside time for reflection on their work. This reflection would focus on questions such as “*Am I happy?*” or “*Why am I doing this?*” As one physician said: “*You need to continuously refocus on what the important thing is – good medicine. It’s something people have to think about.*” Four physicians, three of who were in practice for 10 years or less, also mentioned the need to talk to people about their vocation. “*You should be able to share those things with colleagues. If others are not feeling fulfilled, it’s easy to get bogged down by their negativity.*” Four physicians, all in practice for 20 years or less, talked about the need to find a balance at work. One physician said: “*I always ask what med students do outside of medicine. They need something more than medicine to be happy. They need balance in all aspects in life, especially in medicine where the track is 30 years.*”

Discussion and Conclusion

Understanding of vocation varies from person to person. This is reflected not only in the professional responses here, but also throughout theological literature. We will highlight in this final section several of the differences and similarities between the two groups, as well as both groups compared to sources. Of the five themes that we discussed, which we will comment on below, we can conclude the following. Dentists had a much broader definition of vocation than physicians did. Also, physicians tended to call their work “profession” as opposed to the word “career” used by dentists. There was disagreement within all groups on whether work was a part of who they are or just what they do. Both dentists and physicians felt fulfillment in their joy and excitement at work. They also acknowledge the importance of gifts in one’s calling. Fulfillment was also found in both groups when they were serving others.

Physicians and dentists varied in their definition of vocation. While many dentists talked about vocation in their work life and their family life, physicians tended to focus primarily on their work life.²² The width of vocation is something widely discussed among theologians. As John Neafsey says in his book *A Sacred Voice is Calling*, “the kind of work we do is an important dimension of our calling, [but] it is important not to define the rich, complex phenomenon of vocation too narrowly or exclusively in terms of job or profession.”²³ Many theologians would argue that vocation applies to every element of who we are. They now, “embrace the idea that vocation first and foremost addresses God’s call to the whole person in relationship to their whole life.”²⁴ It is not so much the particulars of what we do professionally, but the way we approach our whole existence. Douglas Schuurman puts it well in his book *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, “In its classic Protestant form, the doctrine of vocation is not concerned with how to make choices between this and that career path, though it does have deep concerns that may have implications for such choices. But it is more about how to relate Christian faith to the totality of one’s life than it is about ‘vocational’ guidance counseling.”²⁵ While physicians were not off the mark in their understanding of vocation, dentists seemed to have a broader sense of the concept that is embraced by most theologians today.

Another difference between dentists and physicians was their categorization of their work. Most dentists described their work as a career, a way to make a living. The majority of

²² Respondents were asked, “What is your understanding of vocation?” Given that the interview focused on work, respondents may have chosen to define vocation only within those parameters. It is worth noting however, that, unprompted, one group provided a wider understanding than the other.

²³ John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 2.

²⁴ Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 28.

²⁵ Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, xi.

physicians, on the other hand, described their work as a profession, a calling. Neafsey makes this distinction, “A career seeks to be successful, a calling to be valuable. A career tries to make money, a calling tries to make a difference.”²⁶ In addition, “the root meaning of the word ‘profession’ is ‘to profess,’ ‘to testify on behalf of,’ ‘stand for,’ or to ‘avow’.”²⁷ It could be implied, therefore, that work for these dentists is simply the way that they provide for themselves and their families, and physicians find their work to speak to who they are. However, this distinction is not a good representation of our respondents. Dentists seemed to ascribe “career” to their work because it was only a piece of who they were. Their understanding of vocation runs much deeper and broader than seeing it as a way to make a living. Conversely, physicians appeared to choose “profession” because doctoring was a part of who they were which they couldn’t “turn off”. Our respondents indicated that the categories might be more an indication of how much their work defines them than why they work. Also, they may use the terms “career” and “profession” interchangeably, not realizing there is a distinction.

Interestingly, the biggest disagreement among respondents was whether work should be understood as “who you are” or “what you do”. This difference of opinion was not between groups, but among all professionals generally. Some felt health care was what they did and only expressed a part of who they were. Others felt health care was who they were; something that extended beyond business hours. The sources that we have researched resonate more accurately with the second definition. Parker Palmer, a Quaker sociologist, would argue that vocation is defined as follows: “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be,

²⁶ Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*, 162.

²⁷ Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 40.

to fulfill the original self-hood given me at birth by God.”²⁸ Using this definition of vocation, work is part of who we were born to be. It cannot be separated from who we are as a person. This, “sense of self, who I am, is deeply intertwined with the other two elements of vocation, the vocational how or what.”²⁹ As Evelyn and James Whitehead put it, “It [vocation] is who we are, trying to happen.”³⁰

Physicians and dentists both acknowledged the importance of what Neafsey describes as the “affective dimension”: “When, at the deepest level of being, we move toward God or in opposition to God, this movement has its repercussions in our affective life: our conscious feelings, moods, and desires are touched.”³¹ All professionals spoke about the sense of joy or inspiration they receive from work. However, this joy was not a passing happiness dependent on external factors. It was, as Neafsey says, “a deep and reliable internal indicator of spiritual rightness.”³² In fact, that joy was an indication to many that their work was vocation and that that vocation was being fulfilled.

Another indicator of fulfillment was use of gifts. Again, all professionals commented on the necessity of certain gifts for their profession and that utilizing those gifts produced a sense of fulfillment. Theologians would tend to agree with these professionals. As Schuurman says, “most people enjoy a sense of fulfillment when they actualize their gifts and abilities as they contribute to the common good.”³³ Jack Fortin, a Protestant theologian who founded a non-denominational organization called Centered Life, also states that, “Awareness of our gifts allows us to participate in the world in a way that is rich and fulfilling for us but also that

²⁸ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 10.

²⁹ Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 42.

³⁰ Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*, 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

³² *Ibid.*, 43.

³³ Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, 124.

contributes to the common good.”³⁴ Kathleen Cahalan, a professor of theology at Saint John’s University School of Theology Seminary, draws upon the Bible in her book *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*. In the New Testament, Paul describes gifts as charisms or different kinds of service. “Paul recognizes that each person in the community receives special or unique gifts.”³⁵ These gifts are to be used for the common good, and are, “to be embodied actions, lived out and expressed in word and deed.”³⁶ Each gift has a purpose for the community; our subjects clearly articulated gifts that gave a sense of purpose for their work.

Perhaps the most central aspect of fulfillment results from service to God and others. Helping others is a professional goal for many, but it seems especially so in the medical field. The respondents fortified this claim. All professionals relished the ability to serve others and found profound meaning in those acts. Not surprisingly, theologians make the same argument. Schuurman says, “The point [of vocation] is to love God and neighbor, and to take up the cross in the self-sacrificial paths defined by one’s callings.”³⁷ Neafsey would agree: “Vocation is not only about ‘me’ and my personal fulfillment, but about ‘us’ and the common good.”³⁸ For these professionals, service comes in the form of healing. Healing is a way that many dentists and physicians feel they are continuing Jesus’ ministry on earth. “The link between Jesus’ preaching and the healing miracles is the powerful message that God loves each person and intends their full wholeness in mind, body, and spirit.”³⁹ Dr. Daniel Sulmasy also sees healing as a way to serve others the way Jesus did. He states, “There also appears to be a sense in which Christ

³⁴ Jack Fortin, *The Centered Life: Awakened, Called, Set Free, Nurtured* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 84.

³⁵ Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁷ Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, 124.

³⁸ Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*, 1.

³⁹ Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 78.

intended that healing should be a way of evangelizing, of announcing that the reign of God is at hand.”⁴⁰ The service of healing allows dentists and physicians to continue Jesus’ work of loving God and loving others.

When addressing change in vocational understanding, all professionals seemed to agree again: vocation evolves. Both dentists and physicians spoke about their change in understanding of vocation over the years. Professional and personal experience taught them new lessons and gradually transformed their notions of vocation. This is consistent with theological literature. Fortin says, “The calling of God is a process, not a fixed system. We are not called to a job, for example, and then required to stay in it the rest of our lives. In fact, God may call us out of one work into another in God’s own time.”⁴¹ Vocation and discernment thereof is almost always referred to as a process in theological literature. Palmer uses the metaphor of seasons. He explains that we never actually answer the question “Who am I?”, but instead live the question in the seasonal cycle of our lives. Moreover, the process of vocation requires experience. Neafsey says, “What is required is a willingness to ‘experiment with truth,’ to engage in a process of trial-and-error, to take the risk of making the best choice we can with the knowledge we have after careful consideration of all the options.”⁴² As the professionals recognized, we never know our vocation with certainty until we have had the opportunity to experience it, sometimes for a lengthy period of time. Cahalan agrees that even though vocation starts to surface early on, it evolves as a person matures. “Vocations emerge, are discerned over time, and can change during

⁴⁰ Sulmasy, *A Balm for Gilead: Meditations on Spirituality and the Healing Arts*, 24.

⁴¹ Fortin, *The Centered Life: Awakened, Called, Set Free, Nurtured*, 60.

⁴² Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*, 169.

the course of a lifetime.”⁴³ As we grow up and learn our gifts and life situations, we learn more and more about who we are called to be at that point in time.

Each group of professionals also talked about obstacles to their vocational fulfillment. There seemed to be some consensus on a few large obstacles for each group. A couple obstacles even appeared in both groups.

The business side of medicine was an obstacle to fulfillment for a majority of physicians and a couple dentists. They expressed frustration that having to do paperwork and other business tasks took time away from their fulfilling work of serving patients. That aspect of their job did not leave them feeling the same sense of joy and excitement that they felt with more relational work. Theology suggests the business obstacles may be deeper than that. Schuurman says, “Whereas vocation encourages deep, covenantal understandings of important relationships, contemporary society often encourages a moral minimalism where obligations are seen as short-term, legal, and contractual.”⁴⁴ The business of medicine not only takes time away from patients, it may impact how professionals view patients. This, in turn, will affect how professionals approach patients, as Schuurman says, “Concerns for efficiency and profit determine corporate decision-making at the expense of deeper obligations to employees and their communities.”⁴⁵ The business acts that remove the vocational approach to medicine frustrate fulfillment.

Another obstacle that a handful of dentists and physicians noted was busyness. They said it was difficult to see meaning in their work when they were so focused on catching up. Some even expressed a tendency toward anger or jadedness in working consistently under busy circumstances. Theologians would agree. Fortin describes this post-Industrial Revolution

⁴³ Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 29.

⁴⁴ Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

phenomenon as “living in a ‘world of permanent white water.’”⁴⁶ Busy professionals do not necessarily have the time to intentionally approach patients or reflect on their work. Neafsey says, “The still, small voice gets crowded out and drowned out by too much hectic doing and not enough being, too much extroverted activity and too little of the kind of relaxed solitude and leisure that are essential to developing a spiritual life.”⁴⁷ Some professionals believe they do not have the necessary “solitude and leisure” to feel truly fulfilled in their vocations.

The professionals interviewed did not identify several obstacles that feature prominently in theological literature. Theology finds the ego to be a common obstacle to vocation. Knowing the inmost self and following it often require acts of humility and acknowledgement of limitation, things not easily tolerated by the ego. Neafsey says, “Being a conscious person, growing in self-knowledge, often requires that we find the courage to face uncomfortable, painful, or even embarrassing truths about ourselves that our fragile egos prefer not to acknowledge or admit, even to ourselves.”⁴⁸ Another commonly recognized obstacle is expectations. As Palmer says, “As young people, we are surrounded by expectations that may have little to do with who we really are, expectations held by people who are not trying to discern our selfhood but to fit us into slots.”⁴⁹ We have a highly competitive, power-driven society that can cause one to, “live a life other than one’s own.”⁵⁰ Whether the respondents were simply unaware of these obstacles or the obstacles were actually absent from the respondents’ experiences in health care, we cannot say.

⁴⁶ Fortin, *The Centered Life: Awakened, Called, Set Free, Nurtured*, 9.

⁴⁷ Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*, 32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁹ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

Promotion of fulfillment was a very interesting topic. Though it seemed many of the professionals had not thought about this issue before, they offered a variety of answers. Some proposed ways in which they personally could achieve a better sense of fulfillment. Others suggested methods for other, perhaps younger, professionals to achieve fulfillment.

Many dentists and a few physicians recommended prayer to enhance fulfillment. They said it helped focus them to the service they were providing, especially in relation to God. Not surprisingly, this is a common recommendation from theologians. “Regular times for prayer and meditation remind us of God’s presence and calling in and through all the ‘senses’... According to one survey, 73 percent of respondents who reported feeling God’s calling in their paid work also said they regularly engaged in devotional reading of the Bible.”⁵¹ Even for those not especially religious, prayer benefits vocation and is a “ready companion during every age and stage.”⁵² “On a psychological level, prayer is a way of focusing attention on our inner experience so as to establish a dialogue or connection with our inner self, to listen to the messages that come to us from within.”⁵³ Since prayer may stimulate vocational fulfillment, churches and perhaps workplaces should encourage such practices.

While prayer can occur at almost any time, there is something to be said for quiet time in a reflective environment. Another promotion technique identified by physicians and dentists is what we will call “sabbath time”. Professionals expressed a need for time to reflect on their work and orient their lives. Theologians support this idea. “Still another spiritual practice from the Judeo-Christian tradition is that of Sabbath, of times of rest in what for many is a hectic,

⁵¹ Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, 68.

⁵² Martin and Langford, *Professions of Faith: Living and Working As a Catholic*, 122.

⁵³ Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*, 11.

overburdened schedule.”⁵⁴ Sabbath time is sometimes essential to hear yourself and do the work necessary for fulfillment. Taking time to reflect would be very helpful for those physicians and dentists struggling with the busyness of their work.

Another way to enhance fulfillment is to talk about it. Many physicians and dentists expressed the desire to discuss vocation with their colleagues, but did not know how to enact that discussion. Many theologians argue that intentional space needs to be created to share life experiences, such as vocation. Schuurman says this has been happening, “Meeting with other Christians to discuss specific work settings is also a good way to sustain a sense of calling. Many professions have been doing this for some time.”⁵⁵ Clearly this is not the case for the respondents, but it does indicate the success of such groups.

Perhaps the biggest way to foster fulfillment is through education. Many of the professionals did not have extensive experience with the concept of vocation, which is notable given that they all attended a Catholic undergraduate school. Even the younger professionals who did have an idea of vocation were unable to articulate exactly what vocation meant or how it should be applied. While education will not be able to solve all these problems, many dentists and physicians thought it would be a step in the right direction. As Fortin says, “Through sermons, Bible classes, retreats, and workshops, the congregation (and other expressions of the church) can offer Christian perspectives (which are often counter to the commonly promoted teachings of our society) on work, marriage, child rearing, and community service.”⁵⁶ Through this education, people should learn about the concept of vocation, but also how to pay attention to themselves in order to discern that vocation. As Neafsey says, “It takes practice and hard work

⁵⁴ Fortin, *The Centered Life: Awakened, Called, Set Free, Nurtured*, 103.

⁵⁵ Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, 71.

⁵⁶ Fortin, *The Centered Life: Awakened, Called, Set Free, Nurtured*, 95.

to develop “eyes to see” and “ears to hear.” To do so, we must commit ourselves to cultivating the art and skill of what William Least Heat Moon has called “the god-awful difficulty of just paying attention.”⁵⁷ If people know how to listen to themselves and God, the chances of them finding their vocation and feeling fulfilled within it are much greater.

Even though vocation is a word that is ever changing and vastly defined, we were able to gain some perspective from physicians and dentists on what vocation means to them. Through our research, we were able to add information to a field that has not been studied much in terms of vocation and calling. We have learned that dentists see their vocation in much broader terms, whereas physicians understand vocation in terms of their work life. On the other hand, physicians use the term profession to describe their work, which says more about what the work means in their lives. Dentists tended to use the word “career,” which implies that work means making a living. Both dentists and physicians disagreed on whether their work was about who they are or what they do. These groups also find fulfillment in their vocations when they feel a sense of joy and excitement when they work, when they are using their gifts fully, and when they have the opportunity to show the love of God through service. They see that vocation is something that is ever-changing as time continues on. As our lives change, so too does our calling. Every vocation faces challenges and obstacles – both physicians and dentists found these to be the business aspects of the work that take them away from patients, as well as high intensity and busy work, which can take away from time to reflect. Lastly, all groups agreed that prayer, discussion/conversation, and awareness/education could help promote fulfillment and counteract obstacles faced in vocation. In conclusion, this research has allowed us to understand dentistry and medicine far better in terms of vocation. From these interviews, we now have ideas

⁵⁷ Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*, 11.

to integrate into our own future careers. Much of what both physicians and dentists discussed can be applied into our lives moving forward. We have been able to reflect on our own future endeavors and thoughts on our own vocations. We would like to thank all those that participated in the interviews that made this research possible.

e. What is your understanding of vocation?

B. Fulfillment of Vocation

a. When do you experience a sense of meaning at work?

b. A calling is unique, requires more than desire, gives a sense of energy and enjoyment and isn't easy to discover. Do these ring true in your life?

c. Fr. Michael Himes says a vocation should be a source of joy, engage your gifts and talents in the fullest way possible and genuinely serve the people around you. Does this describe your work?

d. How does your work continue Jesus' ministry?

e. Would you say your vocation is being actively fulfilled?

Closing Statement: We'll be analyzing the information you and others provided and submitting a thesis in April 2013. If you are interested, I would be happy to share a copy of it with you at that time. Thank you for your time.

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