CALLING IN CONTEXT

SOCIAL LOCATION AND VOCATIONAL FORMATION

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PART 1

MAPS, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS, AND "YOU ARE HERE"

When we navigate a city using a digital map on our phones or when we use a posted map in a large space such as a shopping mall, we need to have a sense of where we are before we can figure out how to navigate to where we need to go. We know to look for the "you are here" marker on the mall diagram or for that blue dot on our digital maps. This first section of the book seeks to orient us to the "you are here" of our vocational development at this moment in time.

NAVIGATION POINT
Calling, Vocation, and Vocational Formation

I use the terms *calling* and *vocation* somewhat interchangeably in this text. The popular understanding of *vocation* tends to focus on a career or occupation. However, the word comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means "to call." Theologically, calling and vocation are synonyms. I use the phrase "vocational formation" to reference the process of being equipped and sustained in a lifetime journey of faithful participation in God's work in the world.

In this section, I lay out foundational concepts, exploring some common elements in how Christians in the United States think about calling and the process of vocational formation. The first chapter introduces a key idea for the text—social location—and a central metaphor: maps. The second chapter investigates elements of biblical content related to calling, considering how our cultural maps affect how we approach the Bible and what we see in the calling stories we most commonly reference. The third chapter explores the nature of vocational formation as a lifelong process by reflecting on useful perspectives from developmental psychology.

All of this work is intended to help us name our current locations, both literally in terms of the communities and social groups where we live and figuratively in terms of where we are in the process of discerning and developing in our callings. God is already present and already at work in our lives. My prayer is that you will reflect on this content in such a way that you are able to perceive with greater clarity the presence of God in your circumstances.

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1

"What Is My Calling?" and Other Problematic Maps

The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

FREDERICK BUECHNER, *WISHFUL THINKING*

"Yes, but what is my calling?"

Dante was a man in his early thirties working as a counselor in a program for at-risk youth. Many nights he could be found out on the streets, engaging the teens he encountered with a winsome evangelistic presence. Dante had a deep love for God and for people, particularly young people on the margins of society. His passion was evident and he clearly demonstrated giftedness and skill in this work. Yet Dante wondered about his calling.

Dante's question "What is my calling?" came in the context of an intense classroom discussion about the ways God works through life experiences to shape a person's sense of calling. The discussion followed an assignment—an exercise intended to help a person think through their life experiences and what those experiences suggest about God's purposes in their lives.[1] Dante had a long list of experiences in which he saw

[1]The "Destiny Log" exercise was from the work of J. Robert (Bobby) Clinton, longtime professor of leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary. See the "destiny processing" content in J. Robert

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God at work in his life. Many of them were part of the series of experiences that led Dante to the ministry he was currently engaged in and to the decision to return to school for further training. Yet somehow this was not enough for Dante to feel he "knew" his calling. "I'm encouraged to see, in writing, all the events and ways in which God has been active," Dante said. "But I still want to know: What is my calling?"

What was the gap for Dante? Given that he was already engaged in ministry and that he was able to name experiences that demonstrated God's leading to that place, why did Dante still wonder about his calling? Why were the experiences Dante identified insufficient to create a narrative of calling?

Dante was one of the many emerging and developing Christian leaders I worked with in a quarter-century as a professor in undergraduate and graduate education. My focus has been the formation of individual leaders: helping women and men discern God's distinctive formation in their lives and the particular place of invitation to participation in God's work in the world. Some of these emerging leaders were traditional college students in the early stages of figuring out what they wanted to do with their lives. Many were adult learners with significant life experience. For some of these individuals, assignments like the one Dante engaged in helped them identify and articulate their sense of call. For many others, though, the response was like Dante's: "That was an encouraging exercise. But what is my calling?"

Over the years, I watched people go from book to book, workshop to seminar, counseling session to prayer session, class to class, seeking to know their calling. The search is often full of anxiety. I see many people struggle and question themselves, even when they, like Dante, are already meaningfully engaged in some area of work or ministry. They seek to have some clear method, some strategy for being assured that they know their calling. They fear missing God. They fear choosing wrongly. They fear making decisions that will result in a wasted life. They fear purposelessness.

Clinton, *Leadership Emergence Theory: A Self-Study Manual for Analyzing the Development of a Christian Leader* (Altadena, CA: Barnabas Publishers, 1989).

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FRAMING LENSES OF VOCATION

A number of unspoken assumptions undergird the question, "What is my calling?" These assumptions have to do with who God is, who we are as God's people, and how God relates to us and to the world. They also have to do with what constitutes a Christian sense of calling and whether or not calling and vocation are the same thing or two different but related things.

The challenge with engaging assumptions is that assumptions are largely unconscious. We don't know what we assume. Until some experience comes along to show otherwise, we usually don't even know that we have assumptions. Or we may know, in principle, that we have assumptions but we cannot name them. They are like the 90 percent of the iceberg that lies underwater, present but hidden from our sight.

In the early 1990s, I was on the staff of a training program with a mission organization. We hosted groups of participants from multiple countries who were living, working, and studying together for six months at a time. During the first week, while everyone was still excited about meeting new people from all over the world, we divided the participants into small, diverse groups and gave them a task to do together. The assignment was to name whether, in their church context and in their broader social context, each item on a list of activities was considered an acceptable behavior or not. We told the groups that the purpose of the discussion was not to debate the rightness of the activity; it was simply to name how their church or their community viewed that activity.

One activity on our list inevitably generated a lot of conversation: hunting. The US-Americans in the group often seemed puzzled as to why we included hunting on the list. They thought it was a random activity to mention. The Europeans in the group often expressed surprise that their US-American colleagues didn't immediately see how "wrong" it is to kill animals for sport. It became clear that the US-Americans had one set of assumptions and the Europeans another, and both had cultural and theological values that shaped their assumptions. The goal of the exercise was to bring the assumptions to the surface and make them discussable.

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From that point we were able to introduce a mantra that became very important in later stages of the development of the group: "different, but not wrong."

"Different, but not wrong" applies to the discussion of vocation as well. I, as an educator and scholar, hold a set of assumptions about calling. You, as the reader, hold a set of assumptions too. Some of our assumptions are shared and others are different. My purpose in this book is not to attempt to replace your "wrong" assumptions with my "right" assumptions. Instead, my purpose is to offer reflections and a set of skills that foster our capacity to be aware of and examine our assumptions about vocation. The issue is less about what assumptions are "wrong" or "right" and more about considering what assumptions are helpful for pursuing a life of faithful engagement with God's work in the world and what assumptions hinder that engagement.

We turn now to a central metaphor of this book: maps. Looking at maps can illustrate the power of assumptions as well as help us take a first pass at what "different, but not wrong" and "helpful versus hindering" mean for thinking about calling.

WORLD MAPS: AN ANALOGY

I love maps. On family road trips when I was a child, I would sit in the car with the road atlas, tracing the route of our journey, watching the landmarks go by. As an adult, I became interested in world maps and have collected world maps from different countries during my travels. Let me share several of my favorite maps with you.

The world map in figure 1 utilizes the Mercator projection, a cylindrical projection developed by Flemish cartographer and father of modern mapmaking, Gerardus Mercator (1512–1595), in the mid-sixteenth century.[2] Mercator was a maker of scientific instruments and terrestrial and celestial globes who became interested in problems experienced by European marine navigators. Mariners could find themselves

[2]For more on Mercator's life and faith, see Ann Heinrichs, *Gerardus Mercator: Father of Modern Mapmaking* (Minneapolis, MN: Compass Point Books, 2007).

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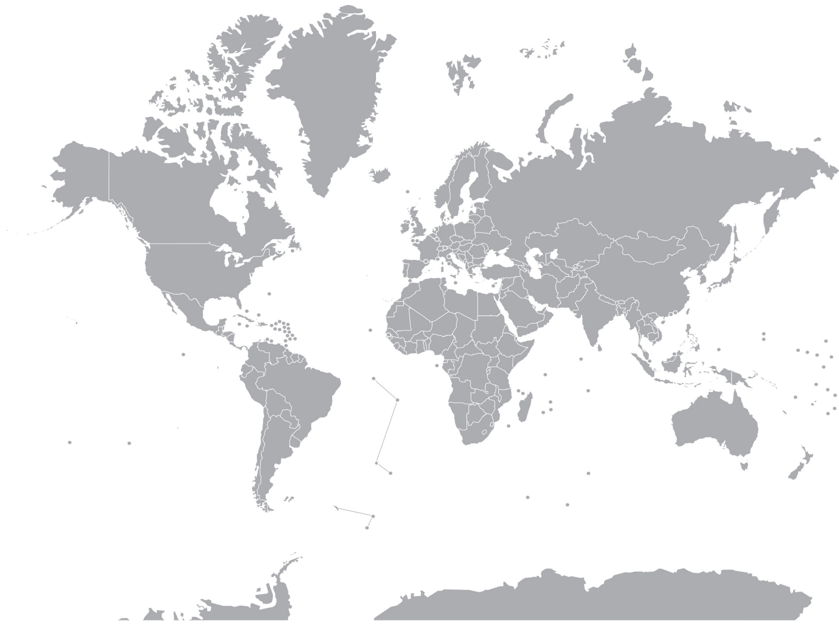

Figure 1. Mercator projection world map

hundreds of miles off course because a constant direction at sea did not match a straight line on their charts. Mercator's solution was to devise a map designed around longitudinal (north-south) lines, increasing the latitude (east-west) lines in such a way that a constant direction at sea could be recorded as a straight line on the map. Together with the development of the magnetic compass and the use of the northern pole star, Polaris, this Mercator's projection became the standard map used by northern European seafaring navigators. This map was adopted as a standard world map and used commonly in many contexts, including US-American school rooms, through the twentieth century.

Notice that the midpoint—top to bottom—on this map goes straight through northern Europe. The equator—the actual, physical midpoint on the globe—is located almost three-quarters down the image, making the northern hemisphere more than twice as large as the southern hemisphere. One of the ways to see the distortion of land masses caused by this choice is to compare Greenland and Australia. Greenland is the large

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mass at the top center-left of the map. Australia is the largest landmass on the bottom-right. In this projection, Greenland looks like it is several times the size of Australia, whereas in reality, Greenland is more than three and a half times *smaller* than Australia.

Also notice the size of Europe on the Mercator projection compared to the size of Africa. Measuring north to south, they appear to be approximately the same length. Now take a look at Europe and Africa on the map in figure 2.

Figure 2 utilizes the Peters projection. Arno Peters (1916–2002) was a German historian who, concerned with what he saw as the Eurocentric bias of common world maps, developed a new equal-area map, likely based on an earlier map by Scottish clergyman, James Gall (1808–1895).[3] This equal-area projection depicts the landmasses in their correct relative sizes.

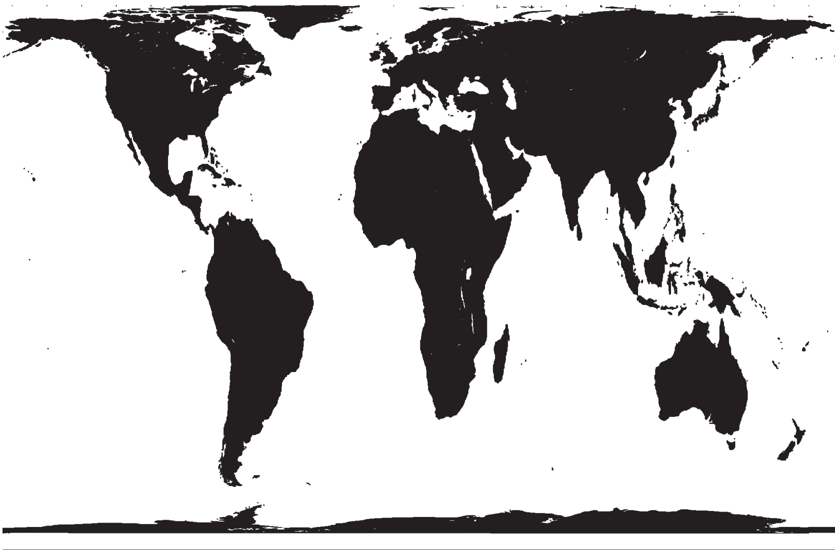

Figure 2. Peters projection world map

[3]There was some controversy as to the origins and design of Peters's map. For a summary of this debate among cartographers, see Jeremy Crampton, "Cartography's Defining Moment: The Peters Projection Controversy, 1974–1990," *Cartographica: The International Journal for Geographic Information and Geovisualization* 31, no. 4 (1994): 16-32.

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One comment I hear about this map is "It's stretched out." The Peters projection retains accurate relative area of landmasses, correcting the distortion of the Mercator projection in that regard, but doing so by introducing a distortion in the *shape* of those masses. For many of us, used to seeing the world from the perspective of a Mercator projection map, this distortion is very noticeable. Meanwhile, we don't notice the distortion of the Mercator projection because that map has been the familiar and normative projection for much of our lives.

Notice how much larger Africa is on the Peters projection map compared to Europe. One response I've often heard when showing this map is the question, "Is Africa really that big?" The unspoken assumption for some US-Americans is that Africa is, perhaps, the size of the United States. In reality, Africa is large enough to fit the United States, China, India, Mexico, and many European countries combined inside it. Notice, too, the location of the equator on this map. Whereas in the Mercator project map, the equator is far down on the image, the Peters projection puts the equator at the vertical center. The "northern hemisphere bias" of the Mercator projection is one reason why the Peters projection has gradually been replacing the Mercator projection as a world map, supported and promoted by a variety of educational and religious organizations concerned with the implications of map design on how developing nations are viewed.[4]

Continuing to keep in mind the idea of a map in our heads, consider figure 3. Sometimes when I show people this map, they spontaneously comment, "It's upside-down!" To this I respond with, "Says who?" The tradition of having north at the top of maps was a development of northern European cartographers, such as Gerardus Mercator, who created maps for use by northern European ship navigators. The use of the magnetic compass and the northern pole star, Polaris, for navigation made the orientation of north at the top a sensible adaptation. (Many earlier European maps put the East at the top.) We continue to put north

[4]For a discussion of the impact of the adoption of particular world maps, see chapter four in Hannah Higgins, *The Grid Book* (Boston: MIT Press, 2009).

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Figure 3. South-up world map

at the top of our North American world maps because that's the convention we are used to. It is an embodiment of our assumption that north is "up" and south is "down."

Take a look at figure 3 again. Can you find Spain? When I've shown people a map like this and asked them to find a particular country, often they will tilt their head upside-down so they can look at the map in a familiar orientation. It is hard to recognize the world on this map because it is so different from the world map most of us carry around in our heads.

So, here's the question: Which of these maps is accurate? Think about that for a moment. The answer is all of them and none of them. All of them are "accurate" for some purpose. The Mercator projection is accurate for navigators on sailing ships who need to determine their longitude. The Peters projection is accurate in the relative area of land mass. The south-up map is an accurate depiction of the globe with south as the top orientation.

At the same time, all of these maps are also inaccurate. Each one of them distorts the world in some way. Taking a three-dimensional, round planet and making it into a two-dimensional flat map inevitably results in deforming the land masses. Every world mapmaker has to deal with this problem. But there's a purpose to the problem. Carrying a globe around would be awkward and impractical; the flat map is a useful, portable tool even while it misrepresents reality.

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One challenge with how we use maps is that we become used to the distortion of our most familiar map and think of that map as an accurate representation of reality. The physical artifact of a map on the wall is an expression of a mental map we carry in our heads. Sometimes the negative consequences of the assumptions of our mental maps of the world are minimal; at other times, they are quite significant. Take, for example, one place where I saw the Mercator projection map in use: in the conference room of a church. In this instance, the particular version of the map used the Mercator projection and put the Americas in the center.[5] There were pins on the map, indicating the locations of the church's short-term mission teams. The mental model this physical map supports is that the United States is the center of the world. The map is both a product of a particular view of mission and an artifact whose presence forms and perpetuates that view in successive generations of church members, even if the church has a theology that says something different.

FROM MENTAL MAPS TO COGNITIVE SCHEMA

Physical world maps with all of their complexity and diversity are a metaphor for mental "maps" that we carry in our minds. Just as physical world maps are shorthand depictions of something larger and more complex—the planet—so too are our mental maps cognitive shorthand for something larger and more complex: experienced reality. Just as the world maps are both accurate and inaccurate, so too are our mental maps. The mental maps we develop are necessary and helpful to navigate life. At the same time, they oversimplify a complex reality and have distortions embedded in them.

Cognitive schema. Leadership theorist Peter Senge writes about "mental models" as cognitive maps that help us navigate a complex world. They are "deeply held internal images of how the world works, images

[5]If you google "Rand McNally cosmopolitan world map Mercator projection," you will find an image of the map as I saw it. A copy of this "so awful, it is beautiful" map is one of the most treasured items in my collection.

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that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting."[6] They contain "the images, assumptions, and stories which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world."[7]

Cognitive scientists refer to these mental structures as "cognitive schemas." Cognitive schemas are "learned, internalized patterns of thought-feeling that mediate both the interpretation of ongoing experience and the reconstruction of memories."[8] A key point here is the phrase "thought-feeling." North Atlantic cultures tend to define cognition purely in terms of abstract conceptualization, enacting a false dichotomy between so-called rational thought and so-called irrational emotion. In reality, the limbic system in the human brain is the center of emotion, so that all human thought is both conceptual and emotional. Cognitive schemas are patterns of thought-feeling: conceptualizations imbued with emotional significance.

Each one of us has cognitive schemas related to vocation: what vocation is, what constitutes a person "having a calling," and so forth. These schemas influence what we think of as a calling. They also influence how we interpret our life experiences related to vocational formation. Importantly, our cognitive schemas about calling carry with them a great deal of emotional significance. Indeed, the concern about "missing" God's purpose and the anxiety many people express about making a wrong choice point to the deep meaning and importance calling has. To simply address calling as a conceptual construct and ignore that it has deep, emotional components is to attend to only a part of the significance of vocational formation.

About salience: schema as interpretive lenses. Cognitive schemas are necessary for navigating life. Mental maps are shortcuts for dealing with the complexity that is a daily part of our experience. They are "salience enhancing templates"[9] that focus our attention on some content as important and ignore other content as irrelevant.

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[6]Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, updated and rev. ed. (New York: Currency, 2006), 163.

[7]Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (New York: Currency, 1994), 235.

[8]Claudia Strauss, "Models and Motives," in *Human Motives and Cultural Models*, ed. Roy G. D'Andrade and Claudia Strauss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

[9]Bradd Shore, *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 315.

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Our brains filter and process information at a level below our consciousness. We need our brains to do this work for us. If we had to be aware of every bit of information at every moment of every day, we would have a hard time functioning. We rely on our brains to process incoming sensory data and make determinations about what needs attention and what does not.

Sensory data can be overwhelming. If you have ever traveled outside of your home country, you may be familiar with the sensation of being overwhelmed by the sights, sounds, and smells of a new place. The exhaustion we ascribe to jet lag is certainly related to a disrupted circadian rhythm, but it is also sensory overload. The newness of the experience and lack of familiarity overwhelms our brain's capacity to filter out some sensory input. Indeed, in a new space, we lack filters that will help us by sorting through all the incoming stimulus, ignoring what is unimportant and highlighting to us information to which we need to give attention. Our mental maps don't fit the new context.

We may feel a similar sense of overload in situations like intercultural interactions. Working with people from different countries involves communication containing complex combinations of information such as words and their meanings, tone of voice, or expressions, many of which are different from our own even when we're using a common language. Our brains have developed shorthand ways of processing the information we take in and making sense of it. Intercultural interactions are uniquely tiring because the kinds of mental shorthand we've developed in our context doesn't fit the intercultural context, so every interaction requires a lot of effort.

When we process our calling, we use mental maps that filter the information we receive through a variety of experiences. Over time, we develop a conceptual framework of what we understand calling to be, who is called to what, and how. We may be conscious of some aspects of this framework, able, for example, to articulate something of a theology of calling, while at the same time being largely unaware of the way our cultural models have influenced the development of that theology. What

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we pay attention to in a particular experience is dependent on what we assume calling to be. Similarly, we ignore data that doesn't fit our mental map of calling. Simply put, our cognitive schema of calling suggests to us what experiences to pay attention to and what to disregard.

Distortions in our mental maps. Like physical maps of the world, our mental maps are an approximation of reality. World maps take a round thing, the globe, and make it flat for the purpose of navigation; our mental models take a complex thing, life, and make it "flat" for the purposes of navigating experience. The problem with our mental maps of vocation is similar to the problems with world maps: we need our mental maps to function, but sometimes the very maps that should help us end up distorting our perception of reality.

In this book, I will offer a number of reflections for you. The purpose is not so much to identify what is "wrong" with your mental map as it is to facilitate your capacity to become aware of your assumptions and possible distortions about the nature of calling and about your experience with vocational formation. Some of those distortions have been helpful to you, like the distortions of the Mercator projection were helpful to ships' navigators. Other distortions may lead you to think some aspect of calling is larger or more prominent than it really is or to miss recognizing something as God's work in our lives. The point is to have the ability to reflect and, in reflection, to see with greater clarity. With this aim in mind, we turn to a foundational concept of this book: context.

THE POWER OF CONTEXT

When I am talking about context, I am thinking of the various social, cultural, organizational, and family groups that are the environment in which we live out our lives day to day. Social location is a sociological concept that highlights how a person's various group identities have an effect on that person's experiences. Dimensions of social location include a person's ethnicity, race, social class, gender, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and geographical location. Our social locations establish our "come from"—the perspective from which we look at the world.

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Going back to the maps, consider the social location elements present in Gerardus Mercator, the cartographer who created the Mercator projection. As a Flemish maker of maps and globes, he was geographically positioned to be interested in how the world looked from a northern European perspective. That his map gave preference to northern Europe is understandable considering his geographical and cultural location.

I named my "come from" in the introduction, and I will continue to name the particularities of my experience, to acknowledge what is distinctive about my experience and the experience of people who share aspects of my social location. I don't expect my colleagues in Malaysia or Australia or Peru to see things the same way I do. Likewise, I know there are regional differences within the United States; my years residing in the Los Angeles area have shaped how I look at the world, and that may be different from how someone in, say, Seattle or Atlanta or rural Nebraska may view the world. In this text I focus on racial-ethnic-cultural identity, socioeconomic status, and gender but we could also explore ability/disability or age or religion as distinctive social locations that influence our vocational formation. This book is the beginning of reflections, not a sum total of all that could be considered.

Consider my student Dante's social location and its impact on how he thought about his calling. Dante had the beginnings of a sense of purpose in that he cared deeply about troubled teenagers. He assumed this was "just because" those teens reminded him of his own troubled youth growing up in the church and rebelling as a teenager. He didn't see this life experience as part of God's shaping, in part because he was formed by a calling narrative that emphasized being a "good church kid" as a qualification for calling. Dante was also a gifted, natural evangelist. Because that role came easily to him, he assumed it comes easily to other people.

Meanwhile, Dante's church experience—both as a child and as an adult—shaped his expectations about what calling looks like. His work on the streets did not fit the "norm" of what a minister looked like in his church, so he had a hard time seeing what he did as a calling. Further, in

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Dante's church, a person was expected to have a clear "calling story" in which they could articulate a deep sense of knowing that God had assigned them a particular task. Dante could point to different choices and events that led to his current work but didn't feel like he'd heard directly from God. Because of the expectations of his tradition, he did not see the quiet, providential work of God in his life as a legitimate basis for a calling story. Additionally, Dante had chosen to return to Bible school for a formal degree. In his tradition, Bible schools and seminaries were viewed with suspicion. The assumption was that what a person needs to know to minister well cannot be learned in a classroom. Dante had heard his pastor joke about seminaries being "cemeteries" of faith.

My assumptions, the assumptions of the author of the class exercise, and Dante's assumptions all played a role in the gap between Dante's lived experience and his capacity to articulate a clear sense of calling. Each one of our mental maps of calling was both accurate in some ways and distorted in others. Dante's mental map of calling hindered him from being able to recognize all of what God had done and was doing, even though the Spirit was actively shaping him for participation in God's work in the world and Dante was faithfully responding to the work of God in his life. The issue was not the doing; it was the perceiving.

SO, "WHAT IS MY CALLING?"

When it comes to processing vocational formation, our mental models determine what we pay attention to and what we ignore about our context and life experiences, and they shape what we will experience, how we will interpret those experiences, and how we'll respond moving forward. In other words, those mental maps are shaped by our experiences in context and then, in turn, they shape our interpretations of new experiences. We live at the intersections of our various social identities and the impact of those identities on our life experiences.

The task of this book is to guide you in the process of taking a fresh look at your understanding of calling both as a concept and as a lived reality. Because mental maps are unconscious, we need something to

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bring them to the surface where we can consider them. The content of this text, the stories and examples, and the questions for reflection are all intended to facilitate that process. You may see parts of your mental maps that you decide are faithful representations of the world. There may be other parts that you decide you want to edit or even discard. The point is to make mindful and self-reflective choices. The ultimate purpose of this exploration is to be able to perceive God's work in the world and God's invitation to participate in that work with greater clarity and accuracy.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Notice your reactions to this chapter. Does this chapter fit your expectations for what a book about calling should address?
2. Where does this chapter conflict with your expectations about what a book about calling should cover? How comfortable or uncomfortable are you with having your expectations go unmet?
3. Think of an example of a person you would say clearly has a calling. What are the characteristics or qualities of this person that indicate to you they are called? How does this reflection help you begin to name your assumptions about the nature of vocation?

EXPLORING A BIBLICAL NARRATIVE: PETER

1. Read Acts 10:9-33.
2. Think about Peter's reaction to the vision. What values, beliefs, and behaviors does the vision engage? What values does the vision challenge?
3. Consider: Why would God give Peter such a vision? Why was it necessary? What was at stake in this story?
4. Imagine: What would have happened if God had not intervened and challenged Peter's mental map? What do you imagine might have happened for Cornelius and his household if Peter had been unwilling to adapt his assumptions?

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Kaiser, Ward L., and Denis Wood. *Seeing Through Maps: The Power of Images to Shape Our World View*. Amherst, MA: ODT Inc., 2001.

For a presentation of the changing art and science of world maps (from a Western perspective), see Stoner, Julie, Rodney Hardy, and Craig Bryant. "Maps That Changed Our World: World Maps at the Library of Congress." Library of Congress, March 15, 2021, www.loc.gov/ghe/cascade/index.html?appid=ddf9824ff56b4fb6a0f3e11515716738.

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