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To Bless Our Callings

Prayers, Poems, and Hymns to Celebrate Vocation

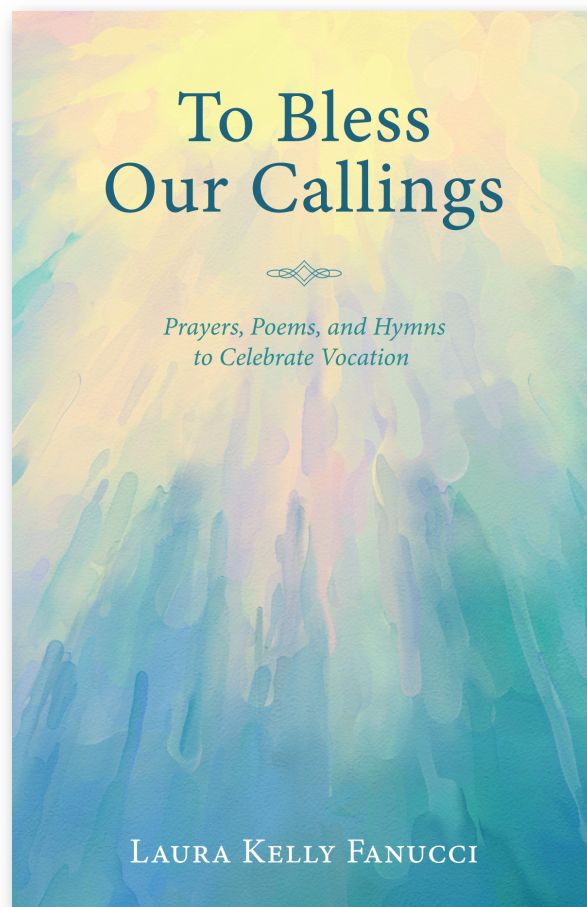
To Bless Our Callings: Prayers, Poems, and Hymns to Celebrate Vocation is an ecumenical collection of prayers, blessings, poetry, and sacred song from diverse traditions.

- **Part I: Ages and Stages** gathers prayers for children, teens, young adults, and adults in mid-life, later and older adulthood
- **Part II: Work and Profession** offers blessings for traditional professions and overlooked occupations—from nurses to truck drivers, janitors to lawyers, salespeople to stay-at-home parents
- **Part III (Seasons of the Church Year) and Part IV (Celebrations of the Calendar Year)** highlight times to preach and pray about vocation throughout the year
- Over 200 prayers and hymns from Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, and non-denominational traditions

To Bless Our Callings is a perfect resource for catechists, musicians, worship leaders, spiritual directors, retreat leaders, campus ministers, and chaplains.

For more information, visit blesscallings.com.

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LAURA KELLY FANUCCI is the author of the *Called to Life* and *Called to Work* curricula for small groups (www.called-to-life.com and www.called-to-work.com). She is also the author of *Everyday Sacrament: The Messy Grace of Parenting* (Liturgical Press, 2014) and the co-author of *Living Your Discipleship: 7 Ways to Express Your Deepest Calling* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2015). She serves as the Research Associate for the Collegeville Institute Seminars, an ecumenical, interdisciplinary, collaborative research project at the Collegeville Institute, funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc.

“Laura Fanucci’s book is a theological, spiritual, and liturgical gem. Filled with insight into how callings relate to the stages of life, paid and unpaid work and the professions, and the liturgical year, it provides a comprehensive and eminently usable resource for pastors, religious leaders, and anyone who wants to relate their faith to every aspect of human life. Fanucci draws ecumenically from numerous traditions, and creates many of her own prayers, blessings, poems, and hymns to provide a wealth of wise and evocative sources for Christian worship and discernment. This book fills a large gap in the literature on worship and callings.”

—DOUGLAS SCHUURMAN, Professor of Religion at St. Olaf College and author of *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*

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To Bless Our Callings

Prayers, Poems, and Hymns to Celebrate Vocation

LAURA KELLY FANUCCI

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

Introduction

WHEN I TALK TO church leaders about calling, they respond with enthusiasm: heads nodding, eyes brightening, mouths opening to speak. Pastors and ministers know that vocation is no dry, dusty doctrine but the pulsing heart of the Christian life.

But as soon as ministers start to share their passion for vocation, I hear them name the same perennial problems, too. How can churches engage their members in questions of calling when staff, resources, and time are already stretched to the limit? Why aren't there any resources that can connect people's ordinary lives—the good and the hard—with the theology of vocation? Since parishioners are strapped for time and energy too, how can vocation become part of the regular rhythms of a community's worship, rather than one more program to try (and set aside)?

For years in my work on vocation with the Collegeville Institute Seminars, I had only a handful of favorite prayers to share with congregations that wanted to explore God's call together. Then I realized the need for a rich collection of resources on vocation was a call too important to answer with scarcity. So I decided to create *To Bless Our Callings: Prayers, Poems, and Hymns to Celebrate Vocation*—a collection of prayers that lift up the callings of everyone in the Christian community. I wanted to put practical theological resources into the hands of the ministers who could use them daily: hymns to sing, blessings to pray, petitions to offer, and sermon ideas to encourage.

But I encountered the same problems as the pastors I hoped to serve: I found few resources that addressed the joys, challenges, and complexities of callings today. So I started writing to bridge the

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gaps: prayers for teenagers, blessings for empty nesters, litanies for retail workers, petitions for engineers, sermon ideas for church seasons, and rites of blessings for professionals. I dug up hidden gems in denominational worship books and discovered contemporary hymn writers who celebrate vocation. Woven within one accessible volume, my creations and the contributions of Christian traditions drew together exactly what I hoped to give to ministers and their communities: the best of the church's resources on vocation and the inspiration to adapt the resources for their own contexts.

To Bless Our Callings offers practical, pastoral ways to integrate vocation into worship services, religious education, Sunday school, Bible studies, spiritual direction, campus ministry, chaplaincy, retreats, and personal reflection. Drawing from traditions in the broad stream of Christianity—Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and others—the book is a unique ecumenical resource that connects rich theologies of vocation with the pastoral needs of church communities in helping Christians live out their callings in the world today.

CONNECTING VOCATION WITH WORK AND LIFE

I see vocation's possibilities, questions, joys, and sorrows sitting in church pews every Sunday. An immigrant searching for work. A woman starting a new career after raising children. A couple devastated by an Alzheimer's diagnosis. A teenager starting to date. A young adult struggling to find a first job. A teacher transitioning into retirement. An accountant wondering how best to serve his client. A newly engaged couple. A recent widow moving from her home. Given the wild diversity of life's stories, seasons, and situations, how can churches nurture, celebrate, comfort, guide, and bless their members on their journeys of responding to God's call?

Celebrating vocation starts by remembering the theological foundations of this central Christian belief. Vocation embraces who we are, how we live, and what we do—identity, relationships, and work. As a theological concept, vocation has now expanded beyond traditional definitions of ordained ministry to include

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diverse ways God calls people within their particular circumstances. It embraces how to find meaning and purpose in work and relationships, how to balance multiple responsibilities, how to connect personal concerns to the common good, how to listen deeply to God, and how to respond with faith and courage.

Yet many Christians do not believe they have a calling.

Many people report finding purpose and meaning in their work, family, and relationships. But even those who are highly involved in churches often struggle to relate who they are or what they do with a calling from God. Why does this disconnect exist? One reason is language. When Christians are asked to describe their lives in relationship to God, theological terms like *vocation* fall flat. Ironically, bookstores' self-help and inspirational sections overflow with new titles on "meaning," "purpose," and "fulfillment." The concept of calling is no longer religious, and therefore most Christians do not see their lives as a response to God as caller.

Another reason for the deep disconnect is that people do not belong to communities of calling. They rarely hear the joys and challenges of their vocations addressed in sermons or in prayer during worship. They seldom receive a blessing for being an accountant, a truck driver, a college student, or a new grandmother. Most congregations lack ways for members to explore their work or relationships as callings—leaving many Christians who long to understand God's call for their lives to figure it out alone.

Where vocation is neglected, the church is diminished. When questions of calling are left in church pews unnoticed, people stop showing up.

But congregations that celebrate and support people's callings can help connect their lives to God's work in the world and the flourishing of the common good. Vocation is not simply a subject for a one-time sermon or even a six-week series—it is a matter of life and death for the survival of the church and for the thriving of its people.

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HOW TO BLESS CALLINGS

Through prayer, poetry, and sacred song, *To Bless Our Callings* speaks to the heart of vocation's richness. This book is intended for use primarily by pastors and ministers for your planning of worship and other aspects of congregational and community life. It has three main parts. Part 1 (Ages and Stages) gathers worship resources for childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, later adulthood, and older adulthood:

- prayers to mark milestones and everyday moments
- blessings for times and places of congregational welcome
- petitions for particular needs, griefs, and losses
- hymns and poems with themes related to each lifespan stage

Part 2 (Work and Profession) offers resources that speak to work as a calling:

- prayers for work and unemployment
- petitions and prayers for particular professions
- a ritual of blessing that can be adapted for use with any professional group

Part 3 (A Year of Blessing) highlights moments to pray and preach about calling throughout the liturgical and secular calendars, to inspire your preaching and connect themes from church feasts and cultural holidays with the stories of vocation in your congregation.

To Bless Our Callings includes prayers to lift up the general calling shared by all Christians: our common call to discipleship as followers of Christ. It also offers unique blessings that speak to particular callings: the diverse ways that people are called to their work, relationships, and other forms of service. Half of the prayers and blessings in the book were written by me, drawing from the theological work on vocation from the Collegeville Institute Seminars (see the appendix to learn more). Half were collected from a broad range of denominational and pastoral resources. To accommodate an ecumenical audience, Scripture references are

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taken from the New Revised Standard Version, a widely accepted translation. As you use these resources within your own ministry context, you may be encouraged—as I have been—to discover how deeply the central claims of vocation resonate across Christian traditions.

CELEBRATING CALLING IN COMMUNITY

To Bless Our Callings aims to help you start conversations about vocation with the people you serve. This is how churches become communities of calling: by blessing, celebrating, and supporting the vocations of all. *To Bless Our Callings* is intended to offer creative inspiration for your own ministry. As I have done throughout this book, you may find that you need to create your own prayers on calling or adapt existing prayers to serve your context. While the volume covers the lifespan from birth to death and celebrates a wide variety of work that people do, it is meant to be evocative, not exhaustive. By illustrating the diversity and complexity of callings, I hope to equip and inspire you as a minister to bless, pray, sing, and preach about vocation throughout the year.

People today are hungry to have their personal and professional identities affirmed by their faith communities. They long to share stories of struggle and joy related to God's work in their lives. So when churches start nurturing the callings of all their members, powerful transformations can happen. Your vocation as a minister invites you to lift up the callings of all people and walk with them on their journeys of faith—no matter their age, profession, or stage of life. May your own sense of vocation be strengthened as you celebrate God at work in the lives of those you are called to serve.

PART 1

Ages and Stages

O God, from my youth you have taught me,
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.
So even to old age and gray hairs,
O God, do not forsake me,
until I proclaim your might
to all the generations to come.

—Ps 71:17–18

PART 1 OF *To Bless Our Callings* offers prayers, poems, and hymns for use in ministry with people across the lifespan. Chapters 1 through 6 honor the particular joys, struggles, challenges, and gifts of each stage: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, later adulthood, and older adulthood. A final chapter offers a collection of general resources that speak to the callings of the whole lifespan across generations, including prayers for weddings and funerals.

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Prayers for Childhood

TO CELEBRATE CALLINGS, LET us start at the beginning—with the youngest. Children have vocations. They are not simply on the way to becoming a teenager and then an adult; they are called by God as the children they are today. From an early age, children can experience God's presence—in nature, at play, or in church—in ways that lead them to feel connected to the divine. This connection can lead to a strong sense of being called to a particular kind of work, role, or relationship. When invited to share stories about their sense of calling, adults often remember childhood as a fertile time for vocational exploration, experience, and imagination.

Children's sense of calling emerges in a variety of ways. First, they have a deep capacity for faith and wonder. By their smaller size and their fresh perspectives, they see things differently than adults, and they ask big questions about the world around them. Second, children have particular gifts that emerge at home, school, or church. If nurtured in childhood, these gifts can lead to a path to follow toward work and service in the future. Third, children have particular callings to be sons and daughters, siblings and students, friends and neighbors, and members of faith communities. Through these roles and relationships, children call forth the callings of adults in turn—to be parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers and neighbors, coaches and caregivers.

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Communities that welcome children and their callings challenge popular misconceptions that vocation is only about paid work in adulthood. By noticing and nurturing the gifts of children in its midst, your congregation can bear prophetic witness to calling as the fundamental relationship between humans and God from the beginning of our lives.

BLESSINGS FOR MOMENTS AND MILESTONES

A General Blessing for the Callings of Children

The following blessing for the calling of children (based on 1 Sam 3) can be prayed before or after a children's sermon, or when the Scripture readings for the day speak about children.

God our caller,
You woke Samuel in the night with your call.
Help children to listen for your call in their lives.

You filled Samuel's heart with questions and wonder.
Open the eyes and ears of children to see and hear your ways.

You led Eli to help Samuel understand your words.
Let us listen to the voices of children as we seek to guide them in faith.

You remained with Samuel as he grew.
Bless children as they grow through work and play.

Help all of us gathered here, young and old,
to respond to your call with trust
as we echo Samuel's words:
"Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

Amen.

Prayers for Childhood

A Blessing for the Child in the Womb

A new calling is created with the beginning of each new life. The prophet Jeremiah believed God called him before his birth: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer 1:5). The psalmist speaks of God like a weaver who “knit me together in my mother’s womb . . . intricately woven in the depths of the earth” (Ps 139:13, 15). The following blessing for a child in the womb can be prayed at baptism preparation classes, in parents’ groups, or at home by the parents themselves.

Creator God,
You knit each life together
in the sacred dark of the womb,
weaving a new calling.

You breathe your Spirit
into each new life,
filling body and soul with love.

Bless this baby who grows each day and night,
whose life is still a mystery,
whose vocation will unfold before our eyes.

Help us to welcome this child with love
and to let our lives be changed
by all that this child will call forth from us.

Amen.

Part 1: Ages and Stages

A Blessing after Birth

Celebrating childbirth as a vocational experience frames this life-changing transition as a powerful encounter with God's presence—not only for the child but also for the parents, grandparents, other relatives, and caregivers. This blessing after the birth of a child can be prayed in the hospital, at home, within Sunday worship, or in other gatherings with new parents. (For children welcomed by adoption or foster care, change the word *birth* to *adoption*, *arrival*, or other appropriate term.)

God of Life,
We thank you for the life of this child, *N*.
for *her* safe arrival into the arms of *her* parents.

May their joy at the *birth* of their *daughter*
increase with wonder
at each moment and milestone of *her* first year.
Help *N*'s parents to believe,
even during long days and sleepless nights,
that they are planting seeds of love and trust
that will bloom in time.

Bless *N*'s parents and grandparents, *brothers* and *sisters*, friends and
family,
as they rejoice in welcoming this new love into their lives.
Bless the caregivers, teachers, doctors, and nurses
who will comfort and care for *N*. as *she* grows.
Let all of us share in their calling
to help raise and nurture *N*.
May we respond to *her* needs,
encourage *her* gifts,
and welcome *her* in your name
as a member of our community,
called by God.

Amen.

Prayers for Childhood

A Blessing at Baptism

Baptism marks a Christian's initiation into a community of disciples who share a common calling to follow Christ. While your tradition has its particular rites for baptism, you may wish to add the following blessing to the end of the service as a sending forth of the newly baptized child and the community called to care for its newest member.

God of new life,
Bless this newly baptized child, *N.*
called to follow Christ.

Grant that as *N.* awakens
to the brokenness and beauty of our world,
he will be strengthened by the grace of baptism
to bring hope where there is doubt,
love where there is hate,
and peace where there is fear.

Guide *N.*'s feet
to walk in the path of discipleship.
Bless *his* way
with wise companions and gentle guides.
Call forth *his* gifts
to serve the common good,
as you call each of us
to give our lives in love.

As we go forth from this place,
holding *N.* in our prayers,
help us to hold in our hearts
the hope of this day,
remembering our own call to follow Christ.
Deepen the faith of our community
that we might bear witness to the promises of baptism,
strengthened by your Spirit. Amen.

Part 1: Ages and Stages

A Blessing for Welcoming Children to the Lord's Supper

Each time a congregation gathers around the table, we remember our need for nourishment to sustain our callings. Whenever the community celebrates the moment of a child's first participation in the Lord's Supper, the moment is an important step in the child's vocational journey. This blessing can be offered after communion, at a special gathering following the service, or at home with the child's family.

God of goodness,

When Jesus blessed food to feed the thousands,
it was a child who first brought forth
the loaves and fishes he had to share.
Let us receive the gifts of children with open arms,
that our whole community might be fed
from their love and laughter.
Bless the children who receive communion
for the first time today.
May they always be nourished by your love
and strengthened to carry out your call
to serve the hungry world as Jesus did.
May all of us gathered in this place
let ourselves be poured out
in service of our callings.
May our lives be blessed
by the communion of your love. Amen.

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A Blessing for a New School Year for Elementary Students

The call to be a student is a central part of childhood. The opening of a new school year provides a fitting moment to bless the vocations of children as students. To include the voices of children in worship, you may invite a group of children to lead this prayer by each taking one line of the litany.

God of love,
May your Spirit guide us as we start a new school year.

We are called to be students.
Bless our learning and growing, at home and at school.

We are called to be friends.
Help us to care for each other, with kindness and compassion.

We are called to be leaders.
Bless our listening and speaking, in our classrooms and communities.

We are called to be followers.
Help us to live out our faith in Christ, no matter where we go.

May we greet each new day as a chance to learn and grow
in faith and love for you, who calls each of us by name.

In Jesus's name we pray,
Amen.

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PRAYERS FOR TIMES AND PLACES OF WELCOME

Following the witness of Jesus who welcomed and blessed children, Christians are invited to see care for children as a communal concern and a vital part of the church's mission. One way to honor the vocations of children is to pray over the times and places where children gather at your church: in the nursery, in classrooms, and at camps.

A Prayer for the Nursery

The church nursery offers a perfect place to bless the callings of children: "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest" (Luke 9:48). This prayer for the nursery can be used to bless children and their caregivers. It can also be posted on the nursery wall to remind all who enter that this room is a sacred space.

God who shepherds the lambs and cares for the least,
Bless the children who play and learn in this place.
Grant patience and joy to their caregivers.
Keep these children safe and secure in their care.

May this sacred space be a place
where children learn about God's love and listen for God's call.
May our community always hold these children in prayer
and welcome their gifts in your name.

We pray in the name of Jesus, your child.
Amen.

A Prayer for Sunday School or Religious Education Classes

Children need wise, caring adults to instruct and guide them, especially as they explore the big questions that children are unafraid

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to ask. This prayer for Sunday school or religious education classes can be prayed by teachers and students at the beginning of each class or during catechists' meetings.

God of wisdom and wonder,
Help us learn from each other
as we learn about you.
Speak your truth to our hearts.
Shine your light on our questions.
Guide our searching and seeking.
Direct our thoughts and efforts
to work together in your name.
Let us encourage each other
as we work toward your reign of justice
and forgive one another
as we walk on the way of discipleship.
Help us to love those you call us to love.
Amen.

A Prayer for Vacation Bible School or Summer Camp

Summer programs like vacation Bible school or church camps offer creative opportunities to encourage children in their Christian callings through songs, games, skits, and crafts. This blessing can be prayed at the beginning or end of each day, or in the weeks of preparation by staff and lay leaders.

God of delight,
Bless our week together,
our playing, singing, learning, and creating together.
Open our ears to hear your word.
Open our eyes to see the needs of our world.
Open our hearts to serve with love.
May we grow in love for you and for each other
as we listen to your call in our lives.
Amen.

Part 1: Ages and Stages

PETITIONS FOR THE CALLINGS OF CHILDHOOD

Including the cares and concerns of children within worship acknowledges their full personhood and expands the community's circle of prayer to embrace its youngest members. As you offer petitions for the needs of children, remember to focus on their callings. The following intercessions related to the callings of children may be adapted to fit the particular format, rhythm, and needs of your congregation's worship.

For children who are called by God, especially those called within situations of great difficulty; for children who suffer from illness, poverty, hunger, homelessness, abuse, or violence.

For children who call adults to grow in patience, especially for children with special needs, that all of us might accept the invitation of the youngest among us to slow down and serve others.

For the gifts of laughter, wonder, and imagination that children bring to the world.

For children who struggle to hear God's voice at home because of neglect or abuse, that other adults will nurture their callings and help them flourish.

For the children gathered with us today, and all the children in our lives, that our community will welcome their gifts, energy, and enthusiasm.

Prayers for Childhood

**POEMS TO SPEAK TO THE CALLINGS OF
CHILDREN**

Three Choices

For any one problem
three choices are clear—

Make it worse.
Make it better.
Leave it the same.

Again and again
we are faced with
these three.

Learning to live
is like playing
a game.¹

—AMY LUDWIG VANDERWATER

Changing

A ball of yarn becomes a scarf.
A pup becomes a dog.
A bowl of cherries turns to pie.
A tree becomes a log.

A log becomes a rocking chair.
Mud turns into stone.
An acorn grows into a tree.
A body fades to bone.

1. VanDerwater, "Three Choices."

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Summer bows to winter.
An egg becomes a snake.
A stranger once is now a friend.
Ice becomes a lake.

A giggle grows into a laugh.
Weak turns into strong.
A house becomes a cozy home.
An old dream turns to song.

A pile of twigs becomes a nest.
A thought becomes a book.
Our world is changing every day.
Everywhere you look.²

—AMY LUDWIG VANDERWATER

**HYMNS TO CELEBRATE THE CALLINGS OF
CHILDREN**

Christ, Protector of the Children

Lord, we pray you, save all children
from abuse, disease, despair.
May they grow by love surrounded,
held within your boundless care.

Give to parents wisdom, patience,
courage in their testing role;
guide those offering help and counsel,
making broken families whole.

2. VanDerwater, "Changing."

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Christ, you suffered with the suffering,
felt their sorrow, healed their pain;
your compassion is our model;
bless our work, our strength sustain.

May we, in our various callings,
be alert to children's need,
open doors of hope and safety,
seek the lost, the hungry feed.

Bring back smiles to frightened faces;
give to fragile bodies health;
may the joy of happy children
be of greater gain than wealth.

Christ, protector of the children,
liberator, teacher, friend,
keep us watchful, wise, supportive—
children's lives on us depend.³

SUGGESTED TUNE: STUTTGART (8.7.8.7)

God of Generations

God of generations, we are all your children;
To your church we bring our gifts, our worship and our song.
Young and old we follow, hand in hand together:
In your great love, together we are strong.

Christ, you welcomed children, called us to be like them,
And received a boy's small gift to feed a hungry crowd.
In our church's children, may we see you working:
More than "our future"! They are faithful now.

3. Marshall, "Christ, Protector of the Children."

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Spirit, freely moving, giving youth a vision,
By your grace young Jeremiah heard your loving call;
Mary was a young one when she learned her mission:
Through faithful youth, you offer truth to all.

God of men and women, Helper on our journey,
You have called us in our faith to grow and to mature.
May we keep on learning, worshiping and praying,
That each new day, we'll serve you all the more.

Abraham and Sarah trusted in your promise:
Age was no condition when you gave them work to do.
Old and young we follow, hand in hand together;
At every age, Lord, we belong to you.⁴

SUGGESTED TUNE: NICAEA (12.12.12.10)

4. Gillette, "God of Generations."

2

Prayers for Adolescence

GIVEN THE RIGHT CARE and circumstances, adolescents' sense of calling can bloom and ripen. Like children, adolescents do not have "almost vocations," waiting for what or whom they will become as adults. Instead, God calls young people as they are, with roles to play in the church and the wider community. As teens leave childhood behind, they awaken to new joys and possibilities. Adolescents bring gifts to share for the common good: passion and energy, loyalty to friendships and causes, prophetic voices and hearts hungry for justice. Church communities that connect the gifts of teens to the needs of the church can find their communal sense of purpose and mission reenergized in turn, as they show young people a vision of a meaningful life beyond what the dominant culture offers.

Vocation develops in adolescence in four main ways. First, teens can explore particular vocational interests related to work and relationships. Second, adolescents gain and grow into new responsibilities in their families, schools, and community. Third, they begin to make decisions that will have a significant impact on their future. Fourth, teens call forth the vocations of their elders, especially parents and grandparents. When the young Jesus stayed behind in the temple, surprising relatives and strangers alike with his teaching and questions, he claimed his vocation to do the work of the One who

Part 1: Ages and Stages

sent him: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). Even vocational struggles can allow young people to grow as Jesus did, “in wisdom and in years” (Luke 2:52).

BLESSINGS FOR MOMENTS AND MILESTONES

A General Blessing for the Callings of Youth

The following blessing may be used when the Sunday Scriptures include stories of young people called by God, or when stories of teenagers are featured prominently in the news, whether positively or negatively.

Almighty God, again and again
you have called upon young people
to force change or fire human hopes.
Never let older people be so set in their ways
that they refuse to hear young voices,
or so firm in their grip on power
that they reject youth’s contributions.
Let the young be candid, but not cruel.
Keep them dreaming dreams that you approve,
and living in the Spirit of the young man Jesus,
the crucified one who now rules the world. Amen.¹

A Prayer for a Big Decision

As teens navigate new responsibilities and relationships—starting to drive, beginning to date, or taking on first jobs—they encounter unexpected challenges and hard choices. The question *What do you want to be when you grow up?* also begins to weigh heavily in adolescence. This prayer for discernment can be offered for teens who are facing big decisions, prayed by teens themselves, or shared with parents who want to help guide their teenage children.

1. Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Common Worship*, 825.