

**The Intellectual Foundations, Goals and  
Implementation Strategies for the Center for Talent  
Development at Dakota Wesleyan University**

Jacquelyn Larson,  
Director of Center for Talent Development  
Robert G. Duffett, President

*“More than 30% [of those surveyed] said a college  
that teaches you how to get the most out of your special talents  
would **greatly** increase their desire to attend.”*

George Dehne Associates

*“Do not hide in the earth the talent God hath given you.”*

Peter Böhler to John Wesley

*“Stir into a flame, rekindle afresh, the gift of God within you.”*

St. Paul to Timothy

*“Talent is overrated”*

Geoff Colvin

*“Hard work is for people short on talent”*

T-shirt, Sioux Falls, South Dakota

*“Identifying and developing  
talent capitalizes on one’s best qualities”*

Shane Lopez

## I. **Prolegomena**

The purpose of this essay is to lay out the intellectual foundations, goals and what we specifically do with our students through the Center for Talent Development at Dakota Wesleyan University. We seek to wed theory (i.e. intellectual foundations) and practice (i.e. goals and applications). The most important part of this essay is toward the end; what we do with our students to identify and develop their unique talents (i.e. practice).

After some opening comments and definitions of terms, we focus on the nature of talent, how it is identified and contrarians who deny its very existence. There is striking similarities between contemporary definitions of talent and strengths and what the church calls spiritual gifts, call and vocation. As a university of the church, we spell out the concept of call and vocation from the perspective of three leading Christian thinkers – Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Wesley. All influence Protestant understanding of call and vocation. Wesley's thought has particularly shaped the institutional culture of DWU.

DWU is a liberal arts university. As such we make some comments about the Center and liberal arts learning and whether the Center is a fad or gimmick. Finally, we highlight both the goals of and the tangible steps we are taking with our students through the Talent Center.

Dakota Wesleyan University aspires to be both intentional about the United Methodist expression of the Christian faith *and* inclusive. Therefore, in an excursus, we address a non-theological sense of call and vocation. The Center for Talent Development is not just for Christian students.

The intellectual foundations of the Center for Talent Development come from a confluence of four sources:

- The nature of liberal arts education.
- Our connection to the United Methodist Church.
- The Strengths Revolution in the Positive Psychology Movement.
- George Dehne and Associates' marketing research.

George Dehne and Associates (GDA) research discovered that more than a third of students living outside the state of South Dakota said a college that “teaches you how to get the most out of your special talents” would greatly increase their desire to attend. Most of these students report ACT scores of 24-36.<sup>1</sup> This research intensifies previous efforts at DWU to become a national leader in this area.

One of the outcomes of a liberal arts education is the possibility of a well or authentically lived life. The positive psychology movement is a scientific reform movement within clinical psychology that studies optimal human functioning, thus contributing to the goals of a liberal arts education<sup>2</sup>

The “strengths revolution” is a subset research group within the positive psychology movement that focuses on human talent as a means of optimal human functioning.

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<sup>1</sup> GDA Integrated Services, *“Dakota Wesleyan University: A Report and Recommendations Based On A Survey of College-Bound Students,”* December, 2007 p.11.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy D. Hodges and Donald O. Clifton, *Strengths-Based Development in Practice* (Omaha: Gallup), pp.4 and 2. Draft copy. And, Laurie A. Schreiner, *A Technical Report on the Clifton Strengthsfinder with College Students*, (Omaha: Gallup), pp.1-2.

Last, long before any of the above, the church spoke of leadership as a call, vocation and election.

A leading goal of the talent center is to enhance our students' educational experience and nurture faith development and leadership skills for the goal of service to their family, to God and to their occupation. Hopefully, the talent center will better enable our students to actualize Wesleyan's educational values – learning, leadership, faith and service.

But how will the Center do this? The goals and tangible steps below describe what we want to do with our students via the Center. Put simply, the Center will help students build their lives on who they already are. In this, the center and liberal education are co-combatants against our consumer and celebrity culture. Today's culture tempts and tantalizes our students with the siren song that the goal of life is to become someone else. Our therapeutic, self-help culture guaranteeing Nirvana by fixing thought, word, deed or those troubling physical weak spots has, to use a phrase from Daniel of the Old Testament, "...been put in the balance and found wanting." The Talent Center will offer an alternative path.

Also, the Talent Center will challenge two American myths thus freeing our students to soar.

First, the Center will put to flight the notion we can do anything we set our mind to do. This half truth belies a cruel reality. True, we can be so much more than we are. But the tragedy of focusing on "anything" misses the opportunity to be and do "something." The issue is not achieving great things or lacking talent to do so. Rather, the chase

toward “anything” fails to recognize the talents we have to accomplish “something,” – unique, special, important and with excellence.

Second, the Talent Center will relax the tyrannical grip of comparison: be like Mike; look like Heidi; sing like Martina or Shania; lead like Barack; make money like Warren; write like Ditta; or be zany like Farney. The Talent Center will help our students identify and value their own uniqueness and potential as well as that of others. One of the unintended but tangible consequences of the Center will be valuing diversity in its most profound and authentic sense. It is difficult to hide behind labels and stereotypes when the other, too, has talent, not “on loan from God” but given by God. All students will recognize they have a unique destiny – a place in the sun – and need not be like someone else.

## **II. The Intellectual Foundations of Talent**

### **A. The Neurology of Talent**

Fifty years ago a talent center at Dakota Wesleyan University would not have been considered. The mere possession of a college degree was enough to make life “work out well” for DWU graduates. A talent center is possible and necessary today because of the stunning and rather recent developments in our understanding of brain chemistry and functioning. Positron Emission Tomography (PET scan) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) allows neuroscientists to literally observe how the brain functions. This knowledge is of recent vintage and has contributed more to our collective knowledge of the brain in the last 40 years than in previous millennium. For our purposes, some of the most important research expands the

growing understanding of how the brain's circuits are formed and its direct link to human talent.<sup>3</sup>

From the perspective of brain chemistry our talents are an accident of nature; a clash of chromosomes.<sup>4</sup> The human brain is not like a computer: nature does not cobble the brain together and, when all parts are assembled and wiring connected, turn on. Rather, as it reaches a certain level the brain begins working before it finishes developing. The brain aides in its own development; neurons, axons, dendrites and synaptic connections begin forming in utero. At birth, a baby has about 100 billion neurons: all the neuron cells it will ever possess. Some are hardwired to become specific organs; a large percentage is for brain development. The most critical period of brain development occurs before birth.<sup>5</sup> A baby's brain seeks to "wire and link" these billions of neurons into a functioning mind.

Billions of neurons continue to forge links to other neurons after birth. These links or wire like fibers are called axons. Axons transmit electric signals that are received by dendrites. Together, the axons and dendrites form a synapse. A synapse is a gap-like structure over which the axons of one neuron beam a signal to the dendrites of another.<sup>6</sup> Synaptic connections are vital enabling the infant to see, hear, smell, learn and reason. These connections form brain circuits that determine the main highway axons travel to make stronger connections, thus predisposing the baby toward certain mental patterns.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sharon Begley, "Your Child's Brain" *Newsweek* (February 19, 1996): p. 4. On-line edition.

<sup>4</sup> Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999) p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> Begley, "Your Child's Brain," pp. 1-4.

<sup>6</sup> Nash, "Fertile Minds," p.4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp.1-3.

The brain experiences “biological exuberance” in the first three years of life producing trillions of connections between neurons.<sup>8</sup> Especially during this period before birth, the foundation for language, aptitudes, attitudes, and thinking have been laid down and the structure of the brain is almost complete.

By age 10, a child’s brain undergoes draconian pruning. Ruthlessly destroying weaker, little-used synaptic connections, the brain preserves its strongest, most often used ones. The brain is subjected to “neurological Darwinism” of its own type: the strongest connections survive. University of Illinois neuroscientist William Greenough said “it is the overproduction of synaptic connections [before birth and during childhood] followed by their loss that leads to patterns in the brain.”<sup>9</sup> By age 16, 50% of the synaptic network of early childhood is gone. Nature closes weaker billions so that the brain can focus on the remaining synaptic connections. This purging helps the brain make better sense of the world by shutting down the noise of stimulation.<sup>10</sup> By age 18, the brain declines in plasticity (ability to change) but increases in power and efficiency. Talents and latent tendencies that have been nurtured [throughout life] are ready to blossom.<sup>11</sup> Nature is like a sculptor, tailor, carpenter or the department of transportation. Marble, cloth and wood are cut, chiseled and hence lost to create a beautiful sculpture, suit or home; roads well traveled are widened; while those not used fall into disrepair.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.9.

<sup>10</sup> Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), pp. 52-54.

<sup>11</sup> Nash, “Fertile Minds,”p.9.

Adult brain function would be similar to that of an ADHD child if the brain did not do this cutting, whittling or “neurological Darwinism.” Environmental stimulation would cause perpetual distraction. However, since the brain *does* engage in this pruning, the result is a set of mental pathways, filters, talents and ways of viewing life that make us unique. These remaining synaptic connections determine excellence, struggles, enthusiasm and indifference, thus creating the neurological foundation for our talents. Therefore, these gifts and talents are enduring. We cannot easily stitch together new connections with sufficient robustness to acquire new talents beyond a certain age.

Hence, we may rightly assume that every first year DWU student is a uniquely talented person. Blessed (or cursed) with a distinct, enduring, set of talents and gifts; each will react to and influence the world in highly individualized ways.<sup>12</sup>

## **B. The Anthropology and Social Science of Talent**

The Center for Talent Development affirms the Gallup Organization’s definition of talent. Talent is “...a recurring pattern of thought, feeling or behavior that can be productively applied.”<sup>13</sup> Talent shapes the unique way one views the world: why some things depress, inspire, stimulate and challenge; why some things are easy and others are difficult. They are behavioral patterns that make people effective, thought patterns that make people efficient, beliefs that empower success, attitudes that sustain efforts toward achievement and excellence and motivation that engenders action and maintains energy.<sup>14</sup> Talents are as enduring and unique as a fingerprint.

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<sup>12</sup> Buckingham and Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, p. 53, p. 49

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.p.49. Buckingham and Coffman, *First, Break all the Rules*, p.71.

<sup>14</sup> Edward “Chip” Anderson, “What is Strengths-Based Education?” 2009. Privately printed. p.2.

Talent, however, is as separate from strengths as potential is from performance. Talent is like an uncut, rough diamond or undeveloped muscle and the simile itself points out the difference. A diamond needs to be cut and polished to enhance value and beauty; a muscle becomes stronger through work and stress. Thus, a talent is turned into strength through its own version of cutting and polishing, work and stress. The acid test of the presence of strength is, like a strong and flexible muscle or a clear, well cut diamond, consistent nearly perfect performance.<sup>15</sup> However, the DNA or foundation of that strength lies in talent. Without natural talent there is no opportunity for strength. Yet, talent needs to be refined, developed and nurtured (e.g., cut, polished and worked) to seize strengthening opportunity. This refinement is accomplished by acquiring knowledge, skills and experience.<sup>16</sup>

There are seven implications based on the foregoing discussion and definitions of talent, strength and brain functioning.

First, Gallup research suggests that most people are not aware of their unique talent because it is natural to the way they live, function and view the world. Further, individuals report they are often “put down” and teased by others *because of their talent* (e.g.: nerd, the commandant, space cadet, the politician). Therefore, some sadly think their talent is a weakness because of the way their natural feelings, actions and thoughts were mocked; especially in junior and senior high school.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Buckingham and Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> Hodges and Clifton, *Strengths-Based Development in Practice*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, “What is Strengths-Based Education?” p. 8.

Second, individuals *cannot* do well anything to which they set their minds to. Rather, near perfect performance comes only from acting in roles or positions that consistently call forth one's strengths.

Third, comparable amounts of psychic energy, discipline, "elbow grease," study and commitment will pay multiply more dividends when focused on strengths rather than remediating weaknesses.

Forth, the greatest capacity for human growth lies in areas of strength, not areas of weakness.

Fifth, a person will be perceived as talented if their talents match the particular job or role they perform. This match between talents and roles will result in enduring personal satisfaction (if the person likes the job itself) and effective performance.

Sixth, practice makes perfect *if* there is an underlying talent or strength.

Seventh, with considerable work, practice and diligent effort, talent may be added or developed where it does not exist naturally; however, Gallup research suggests this effort is not good stewardship of time or psychic energy.<sup>18</sup>

May talent be defined? Is it possible to identify, label and classify human talent? The Gallup Organization says yes based on their descriptive and analytic research.

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<sup>18</sup> Tom Rath, *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, (New York: Gallup Press, 2008), p. 19.

From Gallup's perspective, talent reveals itself via top-of-the-mind reactions to life situations. These reactions describe and reveal the ". . . trace of your talents."<sup>19</sup>

Talent manifests itself through sudden and consistent glimpses of excellent performance in a particular role – an almost "in the zone" experience. Yearnings, rapid learning and deep, consistent satisfaction when doing a particular task are other "traces of talent."<sup>20</sup>

## 1. SATISFACTIONS

The Rolling Stones song "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" points to an inverse example of talent trace. There is a link between strong synaptic connection and deep satisfaction, enjoyment and that which invigorates. Chances are good that when using our strengths, we sense deep satisfaction. Perhaps Mick Jagger's song is a lament about not utilizing his strengths!

This concept almost seems self evident or trite. Yet, paying close attention to situations, events or experiences that bring satisfaction and a sense of positive accomplishment becomes a significant way to pinpoint talent.

Another way to discover satisfaction and the possible presence of talent is to remain cognizant of one's attitude when doing certain tasks. If while participating in an activity you think – "When will this be over?" it is likely that a non-talent is in play. If enjoying the task in present tense and thinking future

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<sup>19</sup> Buckingham and Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pp. 67-75.

tense – “When may I do this again?” a talent may be present.<sup>21</sup> For instance, when I toured the remodeling of Dayton Hall several times this summer, I could not leave fast enough. Great people were doing important work for our students; yet my emotional reaction to this good work suggests I should not go into mechanical or construction work. As we plan our future, focus our academics, organize our talent center, and lay tracks for another capital campaign, I often awake at night thinking about the details. This activity inspires me and I cannot wait for morning light to move these issues forward.

Two other examples illustrate both tense of action and talent for the position. I experienced weather related problems on two recent flights. Severe thunderstorms forced our plane to land in another city 200 miles away. It was late on a Sunday evening. All airline and security personnel departed. We were stranded. I was in the front row observing the cabin attendant’s behavior. Never, not once, in almost two hours of waiting on the tarmac did she check on passenger well being. Not once did she walk the aisle as the plane became increasingly hot and stuffy. She frequently called local hotels to secure lodging on her cell phone. And, she consulted her regulation manual on compensation when diverted and grounded. Several times she asked the pilots how they interpreted various clauses of the manual. On the other flight the cabin attendant ejected who she considered an “unruly passenger” for asking questions about connecting flights. An appeal to the pilots by the passenger was turned down as flight attendants have jurisdiction over defining and removing unruly passengers. Tension rose as security officials boarded the plane to

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 75.

forcibly remove the passenger. The conflict was resolved when a disabled, Vietnam War POW complained he got better treatment from his captors in Hanoi than the flight attendant was providing the passengers. Security disembarked, the door was closed and we soon took off.

Perhaps these flight attendants were lazy or were having a bad day. Maybe I too, was lazy and had a few bad days when I toured Dayton Hall. But could it be that their behavior and mine came from a different source and reason? Maybe our behavior is best explained by our “top-of-mind” responses that reveal both our character and talent – or lack thereof. The clear indication of our behavior is that we would rather be almost anywhere than with the passengers or in Dayton Hall. Perhaps our lack of talent, manifested in our behavior, was more revealing than announcing over the plane’s P.A. system or saying to our builders “to hell with all of you.”

## 2. RAPID LEARNING

Another way to discern the presence of talent is rapid learning: you simply “get it.” There is a surge of energy when learning to perform the task. If attached to a P.E.T. (Positron Emission Tomography) scanner the brain would “light” up from neurological activity. Steps to complete tasks are unnecessary and hence ignored, jumped over or conflated. It looks easy and is to that person.

Several years ago my family purchased a computer. My son, David, persuaded me to buy it al-la-cart via the internet despite my arguments for purchasing it as a system from Best Buy. My son thought my total-package was unnecessary.

When it arrived he quickly put it together and it worked right away. Had I tried to assemble it, the components would still be strewn around the house. When it comes to electronics, he gets it; I do not – and I get out of the way. His quick learning may indicate the present of a talent.

### 3. YEARNINGS

What one is drawn to, especially as a child, may reveal a latent talent. Childhood passions, yearnings and desires may reflect the call of one's talents. This concept is both similar and dissimilar to John Calvin's predestination theology based on the doctrine of irresistible grace. When God calls a person to Christian community the human will has no power or desire to resist. In similar fashion, our talents call us to perform. Dissimilarly, the call of our talents maybe resisted. They will, however, exert a magnetic influence throughout our lives both calling and drawing us to certain tasks and roles.<sup>22</sup>

Recently, a web- based analytic inventory called The StrengthsFinder was developed that attempts to identify human talent.

Dr. Don Clifton, educational psychologist, University of Nebraska professor and CEO of the Gallup Organization is often called the godfather of what some call the "Strengths Revolution." Clifton was motivated by a straight-forward question: "What would happen if we studied what is right with people?" Clifton's specific focus and contribution to the positive psychology movement was the study of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pp. 69-71.

human talent as it relates to excellent performance.<sup>23</sup> In the early stages of research, he hypothesized that the illusive concept of “talent” could be operationalized, studied and utilized in work and academic settings.<sup>24</sup> Over a 50-year career, Clifton and associates studied great managers, teachers, leaders, nurses and salespersons. They interviewed over two million people about their talents and, from these interviews, extracted 34 of the most prevalent themes of talent. Not surprisingly, they discovered that success in a role was closely associated with talent and strengths.

These 34 themes provide a language for classifying talent. The StrengthsFinder measures the prevalence of these talents. The inventory collects responses to 180 paired choices about human tendencies and thoughts. It then sorts the responses and reflects back the 5 most dominant patterns of behavior. In this way, it highlights the presence of talent and consequently the greatest potential for developing real strengths.<sup>25</sup>

The principle application for the inventory is the work domain. It is not a personnel selection tool or an inventory for mental health screening.<sup>26</sup> It is not like the Strong Vocational Inventory. The Strengths Finder will not help determine whether one should be a butcher, baker or candlestick maker. Rather, it helps a person discern how they may be excellent as a butcher, baker or candlestick maker. StrengthsFinder

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<sup>23</sup> Tom Rath and Barry Conchie, *Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams and Why People Follow*, (New York: Gallup Press.2008), p.12.

<sup>24</sup> Shane Lopez, Tim Hodges and Jim Harter, *The Clifton StrengthsFinder Technical Report: Development and Validation* (Omaha: The Gallup Organization, 2005), p. 3, web edition.

<sup>25</sup> Buckingham and Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p.249.

research is striking in how those with similar signature talents are successful in widely diverse occupations.<sup>27</sup>

We have proceeded, thus far, assuming general consensus on the concept of talent. In a recent book, however, Geoff Colvin challenges the very notion of talent and the intellectual foundations of our talent center. Research, he argues, has yet to *ever define its existence*. And if, per chance, research demonstrates its reality – it is irrelevant.<sup>28</sup>

Greatness in any task whether music, golf or scientific research is not attributable to any innate ability, DNA, synaptic connections, or divine sparks or gifts according to Colvin. Deliberate practice determines world class performance. By definition deliberate practice means focused and consistent repetition in a specific domain to improve performance. It must be repeated often, include feedback, not be fun and be demanding.<sup>29</sup> It is not merely shooting hoops or driving a bucket of balls at the practice range or strumming a few chords on the guitar. It is what the word suggests: focused, long, hard and difficult work. It is constantly trying to accomplish what one cannot comfortably do regardless of endeavor.<sup>30</sup>

Colvin offers a stinging critique of Gallup research. Yet, he says deliberate practice alters the physical nature of a person's brain or body. Gallup and Colvin represent the two poles of the ages old "nature versus nurture" debate now battling the issue

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<sup>27</sup> Buckingham and Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>28</sup> Geoff Colvin, *Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everyone Else*, (New York: Portfolio, 2008), p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 66-72.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* pp.83 and 103.

of human talent. Ironically, each affirms the other's position. Gallup argues talent will never become strength without the acquisition of knowledge, skills and experience. Is this what Colvin means by deliberate practice?

Gallup begins with nature and moves to nurture. Colvin starts with nurture then moves to nature arguing brain chemistry is altered through deliberate practice.

Ellen Winner pulls together the two poles. She concludes "hard work and innate ability have not been unconfounded. Those children who have the most ability are also likely to be those who are most interested in a particular activity, who begin to work at that activity at an early age, and who work hardest at it."<sup>31</sup>

Has talent research provided a new synthesis that fully embraces both nature and nurture? Could it be that talent provides the neurological fuel and psychological feedback mechanisms to aid individuals persevere at deliberate practice?

### C. The Theology of Talent

*"I think most of us are looking for a calling – not a job.  
Most of us have jobs too small for our soul. Jobs are not big enough."*

Nora Watson, *Working* by Studs Terkel

Watson's statement is quest, critical assessment and practical hope. It links contemporary discussion of talent and strengths with past theological reflection on work

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<sup>31</sup> Ellen Winner, "The Origins and Ends of Giftedness," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 160.

and occupation often referred to as “call” and/or “vocation.” Is it possible for work to be a calling rather than merely “punched” time for a paycheck? Could our occupational life be something more than 9 to 5 drudgery until retirement?

By definition, the words “call,” “calling” and “vocation” have similar meanings. Vocation is the Latin translation of the Greek word for ‘call’. Both words have a theological hue, shaped in the West by Hebrew and Christian scripture. The terms “call,” “calling” or “called” are used over 140 times in the New Testament.<sup>32</sup> The theological antecedent to call is election, which denotes God’s action in the world and Jewish and Christian communities. Various Old Testament writers, throughout time and literary genres, portray God electing the patriarchs, including Abraham (Gen. 12) and the nation of Israel for God’s own purposes. Numerous ethical, theological, political and psychological questions are raised by scholars about election. Is election mere determinism? Has it not been discredited due to its intrinsic injustice and sense of partiality and privilege? Election, especially in Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the Minor Prophets is not individualistic or despotic. Humanity may refuse to obey God’s call (Isaiah 65:12, Jeremiah 13:10). Further, election is not due to personal merit or favoritism. Rather, election is for the sake of the universal human community. God’s work and will via the nation of Israel and the church is to benefit “all tribes, nations and tongues.” God’s grace, love, sovereignty and morality, coming through the one (Israel) is for all.<sup>33</sup> Reformed theologian Emil Bruner connects election and providence with the New Testament concept of call. For Bruner, call is unintelligible apart from divine election.<sup>34</sup> From a Christian perspective, God acts on humanity through the preached

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<sup>32</sup> G. Schrenk, Κλησις and Καλεω, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel; et. al, electronic edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), pp. 487-501.

<sup>33</sup> K. L. Schmidt, Εκλεκτος, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 4, pp. 186-192.

<sup>34</sup> Emil Bruner, *The Divine Imperative*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947) p. 200.

word. This external voice energizes the individual to respond to the moral concerns of and service to the community.<sup>35</sup>

In its most basic form call or vocation is the Christian promise of Immanuel, God with us, in all aspects of life. All of life, even the mundane, is not outside of God's concern. From this perspective, all life is to be lived for God's glory and to human service.

In four pericopes from four different New Testament documents (I Cor. 12-14; Rom. 12:3-8; Eph. 4:4-10; I Peter 4:7-11) all writers affirm God as the source of individual gifts for the purpose of serving communal, human need. God's gifts, ". . . to each one" (I Cor. 12:7) are both indicative and imperative. Divine gifts (χαρισμα -charisma) are based on the unconditional and unmerited love of God. The imperative is God's demand that each person use his or her gifts ". . . for the common good" (I Cor. 12:7). Communal service is based on gifts God gave to the individual. Giftedness determines role and function. The interpersonal result of "call" is the existential angst of vocational obligation. Our call or vocation is a means to express love in service to the needs of our neighbor. Some of the gifts enumerated in these 4 pericopes are used within and for the community of faith (e.g., prophesy, healings). Other gifts (e.g., administration, leadership) may be utilized either outside (or within) the Christian community. Although the historical sense of call and vocation was restricted to ministerial and sacerdotal roles and functions, the trajectory of Pauline thought on giftedness suggests a more expansive sense.

Three Christian leaders and thinkers were influenced by St. Paul's expansive sense of giftedness, call and vocation and in turn significantly shaped our contemporary understanding of call and vocation.

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<sup>35</sup> Rudolf K. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel (New York: Scribner, 1965) p. 308.

1. Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) – It is hard to overstate the Augustinian monk’s importance on the subject of call and vocation. Like Wesley, and unlike Calvin, Luther was an occasional, rather than a systematic theologian.<sup>36</sup>

He wrote in the midst of real sixteenth century ecclesiastical conflict and his language bears the mark of struggle – inflammatory, accusatory and hyperbolic.

Two insights from Luther influence the way we understand call and vocation today. While hiding in Wartburg Castle after being condemned at the Diet of Worms; he translated the New Testament from Greek to common German. At times, he translated the Greek word “call” into the ordinary German word for “job.” This slight shift of emphasis from transcendent to mundane opened an expansive way to understand call and vocation consistent with St. Paul.<sup>37</sup>

Second, Luther himself and Philip Melanchthon, the chief author of the Augsburg Confession, affirmed that monastic life was not the best way to salvation or to repudiate sin. Rather, the only way to live acceptably before God is through faith and by fulfilling one’s obligations imposed by one’s position in society, i.e., one’s calling.

Luther did not make the opposite mistake of viewing vocation as the secular equivalent of priestly or religious life. As we will see, he valued the pastoral and preaching roles. He saw vocation from a multivariate perspective. Christians are called to a number of vocations. Some are remunerative. Others – like being

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<sup>36</sup> Timothy F. Lull, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> William C. Placher, ed., *CALLINGS: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), p. 7.

a parent, child, spouse or citizen – are not. The sum of roles becomes one’s vocation. Although overstated and highly critical of monastic communities, he clearly saw that individual Christians had a call or vocation to accomplish some aspect of God’s will for society.<sup>38</sup> After Luther, vocation or call would not be exclusive to priests, religious and clergy. Worldly labor was the fulfillment of a calling too.

Luther may have been too successful and his followers too willing to live out a “secular” sense of call. Luther preached a sermon several times and turned it into a pamphlet entitled “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School.” He sent this pamphlet to city councilmen throughout Germany. Apparently, as Luther’s understanding of call and vocation took root throughout Germany, many parents removed their children from school. Why? Since God’s call and vocation could be lived out in any occupation, why not give young children an early start in a trade or business to help support their families? Luther thundered in this sermon: withdrawing children from school results in “murderous harm” and “serves the devil.” They will care only for “their belly.” And, if children are taken from school, who will be left to go into ministry? “The office of preaching will disappear because of you parents.”<sup>39</sup>

This sermon and pamphlet followed by only 15 years Dr. Luther’s call for theological debate on 95 ecclesiastical issues (1517). Luther’s definition of call

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<sup>38</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s & Sons, 1958), pp. 80-84; Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of the World: Inquiries Into Calling: Career Choice and the Design of Their Work* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), p. 82; Εκλεκτος, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 4, pp. 186-192; *The Augsburg Confession: A Confession of Faith Presented in Augsburg . . . to His Imperial Majesty Charles V in 1530*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Fortress Press, 1959), Article 26.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther, “A Sermon On Keeping Children in School,” *CALLINGS*, pp. 222-227.

and vocation was so widely embraced at the time that the vocation of making money threatened to undermine the vocation of preaching!

2. John Calvin (1509 – 1564) – John Calvin was a prolific author, publishing the first edition of his famed *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536 when he was 27 years old. Three hundred years later Max Weber argued that 5 church groups influenced by Calvin’s sense of call and vocation contributed to the rise of capitalism. He called these 5 groups “ascetic Protestants” (i.e. Calvinists, Baptists, Methodists, Pietists and Lutherans). Our purpose is not to argue for or against the possibility that Calvinism produced or helped shape the cultural conditions conducive to capitalism. H. M. Robertson cautions against linking Calvin’s sense of call and vocation with the rise of capitalism. He argues Weber overstates Calvin’s influence. Other religious groups, such as the Jesuits and secular forces like the increase of capital and double entry bookkeeping, may rival, compete and/or knock Calvin off this perch of Weberian making.<sup>40</sup> Weber himself said capitalistic business organizations were extant long before the Genevan Protestant Reformation.<sup>41</sup> Our purpose is to trace the sense of call within some of these ascetic Protestant groups that influence our current understanding.

Calvin’s wide reach spread throughout Europe and America. The foundation of his theology is the knowledge of God and God’s glory through the doctrine of predestination. Predestination had a significant influence on call and vocation. The nature of the doctrine, that God elects by God’s own choice some to

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<sup>40</sup> H. M. Robertson, “A Criticism of Max Weber and His School,” in Robert W. Green, *Problems in European Civilization: Protestantism and Capitalism: The Weber Thesis and Its Critics*, (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1967), pp. 74 and 80.

<sup>41</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 91.

salvation and others to damnation, had the unintended consequence of severing the experience or possibility of salvation from the ministry and sacraments of the church. A practical question arose. If salvation is separated from church and sacraments; then who are the elect? The important issue is not theological speculation, but how Calvin's theology was lived out. The church was essential for all Reformed groups. Yet, the location of sacred activity was expanded. Calvin, like Luther, repudiated the asceticism of monastic communities. The world itself and sanctified worldly activity became the means to both live out and prove the veracity of one's faith. Authentic faith came not from participation in the sacraments or introspection. Rather, one's call or vocation to Christian living as one of the elect was lived out in worldly activity for the common good.<sup>42</sup>

William Perkins (1558 – 1602), a leading Puritan (Calvinistic) theologian at Cambridge University, was the first Reformed theologian to define call and vocation from the perspective of election. He articulated two types of call. A "general" call is the summons to become a Christian which is common to all who live within the church. A "particular" call is a specific vocation or occupation, i.e., a magistrate, minister, father, servant, physician or teacher. Following St. Paul, the reason of a particular call is communal. God ordained society, the church, commonwealth and the family. Therefore, God wills society to function well and justly for all in order that all will benefit. God's particular call gives individuals the gifts necessary to enhance the common good.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 121.

<sup>43</sup> William Perkins, "*A Treatise of the Vocations*," *CALLINGS*, pp. 262-273.

Calvin and Luther changed the direction and location of Christian asceticism. In previous centuries “the call to a holy life” was lived out in monastic community. Luther’s expanded notion and Calvin’s doctrine of predestination opened call and vocation to the marketplace. Call is to the world, not from it.<sup>44</sup>

3. John Wesley (1703 – 1791) – The ecclesiastical, political and economic situation of John Wesley’s England was different than Geneva or Germany. Wesley’s “parish” was the British Isles except for a brief period in America. By the time of his birth, the English Reformation, Civil War, restoration and Oliver Cromwell were long past. The established position of the Anglican Church in English society was secure.<sup>45</sup>

Wesley was acquainted with both Luther’s and Calvin’s thought. Though dead for 200 years, their teachings exerted considerable influence on Wesley personally and on church life in 18<sup>th</sup> century England and America. At Aldersgate, Wesley heard the words of Luther’s preface to the epistle of Romans publically read. He wrote in his journal regarding Luther’s words; “My heart was strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation.”<sup>46</sup>

Wesley was acquainted with Calvin from three sources. First, George Whitefield, the great revivalist and leader of the First Great Awakening in America was one of the early “Bible moths” and “Methodists” at Oxford University. He was a staunch Calvinist and debated its tenets with his Oxford friend. Second, Wesley

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<sup>44</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 154.

<sup>45</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. Ernest Rhys, (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1906), Volume 1, p. 102.

himself wrote a tract, "Free Grace,"<sup>47</sup> and an extended essay, "Predestination Calmly Considered,"<sup>48</sup> that were stinging critiques of Calvinism.<sup>49</sup> Third, Wesley was deeply interested in the revival occurring in Northampton, Massachusetts. He published a revised and extracted version of Jonathan Edwards' *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*. Outler notes he excised Edwards' high Calvinism while affirming the distinguishing marks of a true revival and awakening. The effectual cause of the Wesleyan Revival in England was Edwards' Great Awakening in New England.<sup>50</sup>

Wesley's understanding of call and vocation came from two events in the 1744-46 period directly related to the revival. The first was the need for preachers and how to select them for the expanding Methodist movement.

Beginning in June, 1744, John Wesley instituted an administrative gathering that still shapes United Methodism. He called this gathering a "Conference." He invited his brother Charles, Methodist clergy (Anglican clergy with Methodist sympathies), lay leaders and traveling preachers to meet in London. The purpose was for mutual encouragement and to consider; "What to teach. How to teach. And, What to do? i.e. How to regulate our doctrine, discipline and practice."<sup>51</sup> And, "How we should proceed to save our souls and those who hear

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<sup>47</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley, "Free Grace," Volume 7*, pp. 373-386 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House), A Zondervan reprint from the Wesleyan Conference Office, London: 1872. This Zondervan reprint of the 1872 edition of Wesley's works is often referred to as the Jackson edition. It was considered the standard edition of Wesley's works for almost a century. Other reprints of Wesley's works in the 20<sup>th</sup> century used the Jackson edition as well. (L. Dale Patterson to Robert G. Duffett, December 21, 2009. E-mail. copy in author's procession).

<sup>48</sup> Wesley, *Works, "Predestination Calmly Considered," Volume 10*, pp. 204-259.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Albert Outler, *John Wesley*, (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1964), pp. 15-16.

<sup>51</sup> *Minutes of the First Annual Conference*, London, June 25-29 1744, p.4. In *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences*, Volume I, 1812, London: Conference Office. According to L. Dale Patterson, Archivist-Records administrator of

us.”<sup>52</sup> The agenda was theological and practical; to affirm sound doctrine, attend to internal and external conflicts and answer friends and critics about all things related to the revival. Outler calls the annual conference a stroke of practical genius.<sup>53</sup> I would add- administrative genius.

The importance of the conference cannot be overestimated. Theological focus, training and development of participants, mutual encouragement and accountability from the Conference fueled Methodist growth and sustained it unlike similar revival groups. For instance, George Whitfield was far greater known than Wesley on both sides of the Atlantic, yet his ministry did not survive his death in 1770.

Personnel selection for the expanding movement was an important priority of the Third Annual Conference held in Bristol, May 12-15, 1746. On Wednesday May 14, 1746, a crucial question arose: how do we determine if an individual is called by God to the preaching ministry?<sup>54</sup>

The conference affirmed four marks requisite for a “call” to preach:

- Does the individual possess sufficient knowledge of the Christian faith, live an ethical Christian life and have an experiential knowledge of God?

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the United Methodist Church archives at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey; the 1812 edition by the British Methodist Conference is considered the authoritative edition of early conference minutes. There were earlier and pamphlet editions of these minutes. However, some were abbreviated. Others left sections out. Some are not catalogued and may yet be in the Methodist pamphlet collections at Drew or the John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester, the official archives of British Methodism. For the above historical reasons, the 1812 edition remains the earliest and most complete edition of early conference minutes. (L. Dale Patterson to Robert G. Duffett, December 18, 2009. E-mail. copy in author’s possession).

<sup>52</sup> Wesley, *Works*, Volume 8, p.248.

<sup>53</sup> Outler, p 135.

<sup>54</sup> *Minutes of the Third Annual Conference*, Bristol, May 12-15, 1746, p.29. In *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences*, Volume I, 1812, London: Conference Office.

- Does the individual have the necessary gifts [talents?] to preach, do they have sound judgment?
- Does the individual have the requisite graces? Do they have the inner stamina and physical strength to endure the tedium of travel, loneliness and rejection that accompanies itinerant preaching?
- Do they experience success in their preaching? Do individuals receive remission of sins via their preaching?<sup>55</sup>

The conference recommended if these four marks were undeniably present in the candidate; “. . . we allow him [sic] to be called of God to preach. These [the four marks] we receive as a sufficient proof, that he [sic] is moved thereto by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>56</sup>

Three issues need attention if Wesley’s sense of call may be meaningfully used today. First, do the four “marks” for discerning a call to preach come from John Wesley or the early Methodists? Late in his life Wesley reflected on the early conferences. He said he started them, picked who should attend and what the agenda would be.<sup>57</sup>

Written minutes of those early conferences suggest a pattern of questions followed by answers. Any could ask, answer and participate in theological reflection. However, the final answers to all questions were *always* (emphasis mine) pronounced by Wesley himself.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Minutes of the Third Annual Conference*, Bristol, May 14, 1746, pp. 29-30.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p.30.

<sup>57</sup> Wesley, *Works*, Volume 8, pp. 248-249.

<sup>58</sup> Outler, p. 135

i Therefore, it is reasonably certain that the marks of a “call” that included knowledge, gifts, graces and evidentiary success may be directly attributable to John Wesley *and* expresses how early Methodism discerned the presence of “call” to preach.

Second, how should Wesley’s 18<sup>th</sup> century “marks of a call” to preach be appropriately applied to ministry and secular vocations in the twenty-first century? The answer depends on one’s theological hermeneutic. Clearly, the intent and purpose of the 1746 Conference was to provide guidance (i.e. marks) to select lay leaders and travelling preachers for *their* context. Does the decision of the conference *then* permit the church to use the “marks” *now*? A restrictive theological hermeneutic questions using today what clearly was contextual then unless there is an almost analogous situation in the church today (e.g. the need for lay evangelists). An expansive theological hermeneutic suggests these “marks” may be appropriately utilized whenever and wherever the church finds them useful. Which theological hermeneutic is the more appropriate one?

I think the best historical and theological thinking on Wesley himself and as a theologian suggests he was an “expansive” and pragmatic theologian. His voluminous writings are based on the contingent and situational concerns of the 18<sup>th</sup> century English church. He affirms the primacy of Scripture and both patristic and Anglican tradition. His view of Scripture and tradition were shaped and revised in light of contemporary ecclesial need, reason and experience. Therefore, based on the importance he placed on his own education, the role of experience in his own theological method; his insistence Christian faith be lived in the midst of the world and his willingness to revise and change

past methods for better insights suggests to me that he would *affirm* these “marks” as a contemporary taxonomy for ministry and/or secular vocation – especially if the church today affirms them.

More important than type of theological hermeneutic, the church that bears Wesley’s name yet still looks to him for guidance on call and vocation. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (UMC) is the product of over 200 years of theological reflection of the General Conferences of the UMC. It sets forth the laws, plan, polity and process by which the church governs itself. The opening Episcopal Greetings lays out the scope of the Discipline; “It is the most current statement of how United Methodists agree to live their lives together,” and, “...defines what is expected of *its laity and clergy* as they seek to be effective witnesses in the world as a part of the whole body of Christ.”<sup>59</sup> The Discipline is quite clear about call and vocation for ordination and almost follows verbatim the “marks” Wesley laid out at the 1774 Conference. Those seeking ordination today in the United Methodist Church should evidence the gifts, graces and fruit for the work as well as the experiential faith and right judgment.<sup>60</sup> *The Discipline* reaffirms Wesley’s “marks” of call and vocation to ministry thus interpreting Wesley’s thought and theology from the lens of an expansive theological hermeneutic. Since *The Discipline* defines expectations for *laity* too, it is not a stretch and consistent of an expansive viewpoint, that God calls butchers, bakers and candlestick makers based on requisite knowledge, gifts, graces and how the cake tastes.

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<sup>59</sup>*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2008, (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House), 2008,p.v.

<sup>60</sup>*The Book of Discipline*, 2008, pp. 203-06 and 209-11.

Last, Wesley's sense of call is both individual and communal. The marks of a call- education, gifts, graces and success are individual endowments. However, the affirmation or confirmation of these gifts is through community. Individual claims of gifts and talents must be confirmed by the community who experiences both the presence and benefit of these gifts. Note in the language of the 1774 Conference how often the term "we" (i.e. members of the conference) is used in reference to determining who has been called of God to preach? "

- "As long as these three marks concur in any, we believe he [sic.] is called of God to preach."
- "But how shall we know, whether they concur or not, in any particular person?"
- "If he [sic.] is near us, we will talk with him [sic.] on the three preceding heads,[marks] and then hear him [sic.] preach."
- "We will desire him to write down or relate the reasons why he [sic.] thinks he [sic.] is called of God thereto[i.e. to preach]."
- "If he [sic.] is at a distance we will desire the Assistant to ...inquire, what is the judgment of the Society in that place concerning him [sic.]"<sup>61</sup>

A Wesleyan perspective on "call" then is individual attestation but communal confirmation. In the case of a difference of opinion, the community has 2 votes!

The second event that shaped Wesley's view of call and vocation was the increasing wealth of individual Methodists. At the beginning of the Wesleyan Revivals (1739 – 1745), most Methodists came from the lower, "riffraff," class of society. In time, Methodists became more affluent partly due to the rising

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<sup>61</sup> *Minutes of the Third Annual Conference, Bristol, May 13-15, 1746, p.30.*

economic tide of the Industrial Revolution and partly through holiness virtues. Some became rich. Wesley's sermon "The Use of Money," first preached in 1744, was an attempt to deal with the problem of wealth in Methodist ranks. He noted an inverse correlation between money and spiritual vitality: the more of one meant the less of the other.<sup>62</sup>

In this sermon he offers his famous dictum on what he calls, "the right use of money: • Gain all you can without hurting mind, body or neighbor, • Save all you can, • Give all you can."<sup>63</sup> This sermon conveys better and is more comprehensive than any other sermon or essay his distinctive approach to the moral and religious issues of wealth creation, accumulation, and responsible Christian financial stewardship.

Things got worse rather than better. As the Methodist Movement continued to grow, so did their affluence. Five years before his death Wesley wrote what he thought was the essence of Methodism. He entitled the essay simply "Thoughts on Methodism." The opening statements are theological and include four affirmations:

- That religion is an inward principle; that it is no other than the mind that was in Christ; or, in other words, the renewal of the soul after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness.
- That this can never be wrought in us, but by the power of the Holy Ghost.
- That we receive this, and every other blessing, merely for the sake of Christ.

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<sup>62</sup> John Wesley, "The Use of Money," *Sermons on Several Occasions* (Oak Harbor, Washington: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1999).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

- That whosoever hath the mind that was in Christ, the same is our brother, and sister, and mother.<sup>64</sup>

He ends his “thoughts” at an interesting place – economics. He again warns that wealth accumulation dampens revival and spiritual vitality. His analysis is thoughtful and, like Luther 200 years before, sees the corrosive effect of living out ones call in the midst of increasing wealth. He almost despairs pointing out the circular paradox of the economic effect of true religion.

- True religion produces industry and frugality.
- Industry and frugality produce wealth.
- As riches increase so does pride, anger, the love of the world and the desires of the flesh.
- The result is the decline of religion (exceeding few are the exceptions) in the same proportion of wealth accumulation. Is there no way to prevent this continual declension of religion... to the nethermost hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who “gain all they can,” and “save all they can,” will likewise “give all they can,” the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven. . . .”<sup>65</sup>

True religion carries the seeds of economic uplift which contributes to its own demise.

Luther argues that all Christians, not just religious, have a call or vocation.

Wesley assumes this adding practical “marks” on how to discern ones “call” –

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<sup>64</sup> Wesley, *Works*, “*Thoughts on Methodism*,” August 4, 1786, Volume 13, p.258.

<sup>65</sup> Wesley, “*Thoughts Upon Methodism*,” Volume 13, pp. 260-61.

knowledge, gifts, graces and success. His concern was not whether Christians had a vocation but rather how to live it out. Several important questions need to be addressed. Why did an expanded sense of call lead to the unintended consequences of diminishing clergy ranks and economic uplift for most and affluence for some? Why did sociologist, Max Weber, think ascetic Protestantism (Weber's term for Calvinists, Methodists, Pietists', Baptists and Lutherans) provide the cultural and environmental soil from which capitalism grew? How did spiritual and theological movements lead so quickly to temporal success and economic gain? What is the link that joins St. Paul's expanded notion of God's giftedness and call for and to community, to Luther's sense of vocation, to the rise of capitalism?

The answer may tantalize sociologists, economists, anthropologists and theologians. Could it be that ascetic theology underscores the importance of the strenuous over the frivolous, of industry, thrift, sobriety and the obligation to do well? Communal affirmation of these virtues dampens consumption, enhances modesty, eschews ostentation and the conspicuous accrual of luxuries. The result of encouraging these virtues and socially condemning corresponding vices is the accumulation of capital, which becomes investment income.<sup>66</sup>

Our meanderings from brain development, to talent, social and scientific research, to history, theology, economics and classical language have taken us far afield. Yet, as a Christian and church related college, the sense of call, vocation and developing God given talents remain part of our theological and educational heritage.

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<sup>66</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p.172.

The Strengths Movement is technically agnostic and their research does not confirm, affirm or deny the existence of God. Yet, their research is suggestive of the link between talent, strength and call and vocation. Through the eye of faith we may see glimpses of God's call and vocation through our talents and strengths. The wisdom of the past affirms the foundation of the strengths movement. St. Paul asserts that each person has gifts (i.e., talents) by God to be used for the common good.

Luther expanded the sense of call to include all occupations. Indirectly, Calvin encouraged commitment to "secular" occupations with the same diligence as ministry. Wesley added a practical taxonomy on how to discern ones call. St. Paul, Luther, Calvin and Wesley speak with one strong, clear and unified voice: the goal of our calling, vocation and use of wealth is the enhancement and development of community.

From the Christian perspective, vocation and call enhance the idea that there is something that God wants me to do with my life. My life has meaning and purpose as I attempt to fulfill this call.<sup>67</sup>

### **III. Talent and Liberal Arts Education**

Our commitment to operationalize our Talent Center puts us on the cutting edge of an educational and psychological hypothesis. May we educate our students in a way that intentionally helps them identify their talents and builds them into strengths? Talent

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<sup>67</sup> Placher, *CALLINGS*, p. 2.

identification without knowledge, skills and experience to build talent into strengths is pointless. Talent will lie dormant like an inactive volcano. On the other hand, talent honed, awakened, and quickened with knowledge, skills and experience will explode into excellent performance.

Frankly, I think DWU already has an enviable track record of aiding students in identifying and developing their talents. I have had scores of conversations with alumni from around the country who attests to this claim. Yet, brain and social scientific research allow us to be more intentional and scientific where we already have institutional and historic strength.

A talent approach to education acknowledges four intellectual realities.

- A college education cannot put in what the brain pruned out. Rather, a college education strengthens synaptic connections turning talent into strength.
- At times, the broadening goals of liberal education seem to fly in the face of a talent approach to education. Weakness or lack of interest in certain subjects is an unacceptable excuse for lack of effort or poor performance. Strengthening a weakness remains important so as not to undermine strength, obtain a degree and become exposed to issues and viewpoints that may be essential to effective performance in one's occupation. And, perhaps, exposure to new insights, information and ideas may awaken talent and possibilities undetected by the StrengthsFinder or previous experience!

- The goal of education should not be correcting weakness but affirming and building on strengths. If we seek to enhance a student's intellectual talent; how would we write our syllabi and assessments? How would we advise? What would a liberal arts education geared toward talent development look like?
- We must move forward with our talent center with humility and a sense of experimental adventure. For most of human history, there was no choice about vocation. Job and work were predetermined by birth, class and geography. If your father was a rice farmer, you would be too, or you would marry one. Peter Drucker observed that it was "only yesterday" that birth and class did not inescapably determine occupation and vocation.<sup>68</sup> The notion of a fulsome call "To be all you can be," especially for minorities and women, is of recent vintage. Understanding of call, vocation, talent identification and development are in process. We are only at the beginning. There are many issues and questions to work out. My view is that the Center for Talent Development at DWU will allow us to be a national leader on applied measures of helping students identify and develop their talents in order that they may learn and live strong.

#### **IV. Fad, Gimmick or Intellectually Substantive?**

Is the Talent Center a recruiting gimmick? Is the concept of talent the latest business and marketing fad? By jumping on the bandwagon is DWU diverting precious resources that could be better spent in our academic departments?

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<sup>68</sup> Hardy, *The Fabric of the World*, p. 83.

A recent article on the positive psychology movement tries to answer this very question. Jennifer Ruark assesses the popularity, future and problems of the positive psychology movement. She notes two successes: the academic reputations and quality research of its leaders and burgeoning popular interest. These successes lead to more success: the ability to attract large grants for additional research. However, popularity has its downside. Application, prescription and entrepreneurial practitioners have pushed the discipline beyond its research.<sup>69</sup> Some wonder if the field is a passing fad.

If positive psychology is a fad, what about our Talent Center? Could it, like the positive psychology movement, be a passing fad too? I have four responses. First, the Dehne research is clear and compelling. A college that helps students identify and develop their unique talent would be very attractive to bright students from families who could afford a DWU education. In other words Dehne discovered a significant market of very bright, highly motivated students who would “likely” consider attending DWU, or a competitor college, that intentionally helped them develop their unique talents and hence best self.

Second, our understanding of talent identification and development is grounded on the basic social scientific research of the Gallup Organization. At this point in our knowledge of brain development and Gallup research on talent, it would be a scientific stretch to call this a fad.

Third, contemporary discussion on talent, surprisingly, has a 2,000 year history. Long before Gallup, Colvin or the positive psychology movement, three different authors or

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<sup>69</sup> Jennifer Ruark, “An Intellectual Movement for the Masses,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* B, August 7, 2009, pp. B7-B11.

editors of New Testament documents affirm individual spiritual gifts. The church in all its branches (Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox and Pentecostal) embraces this New Testament sense of giftedness as the ground of call and vocation. It is hubris to think strengths and talent is a contemporary idea.

Fourth, a meta-analysis from brain research, developmental psychology, social scientific research, sociology, theology and history attests that the concept of talent, apart from the positive psychology movement, is widely located throughout disparate academic disciplines.

If human talent and strength is a “fad,” it is one of long duration.

Contrary to a fad or gimmick, I view the Talent Center as a motivator, elixir and enhancer for academic quality. A tangible and operational commitment by DWU to enter into intentional conversations about a student’s best self presents DWU as a national educational leader. We want to confront our students with a question “Do you want to live a life of strength and passion, or a life for ‘Miller time’ and being 5 o’clock somewhere?” This question is jointly asked by devotees of both the liberal arts and the strengths revolution.

If the above question is asked of the general population, the answer is disappointing. Gallup research concluded most corporations are “startlingly inefficient” at capitalizing on the strengths of their people. Gallup surveyed 1.7 million employees in 101 companies in 63 countries on whether their work utilized their strengths. Only 20% of

the respondents said their work calls forth their best strengths.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, Gallup surveyed 1,000 individuals on work place engagement. Not one person who disagreed, or strongly disagreed, with the question; “I have the opportunity to do what I do best” is emotionally engaged in their work. Not one!<sup>71</sup> And, counter intuitively, the high climbers on the corporate ladder are *less likely* to agree, or strongly agree, that their elevated job plays to their strengths.<sup>72</sup> Two observations are germane. First, I would wager that thousands of the above responders have a college degree from a liberal arts college. Second, this massive job disengagement either confirms Karl Marx’s observations about the capitalist work force or would alarm him at its extent!

Conversely, individuals report significant gain in self confidence after taking the StrengthsFinder and learning more about their strengths.<sup>73</sup> A strengths focus not only improves confidence, but direction, hope and kindness toward others.<sup>74</sup>

The corporate waste of human talent and massive disengagement ought to be instructive for those of us who value liberal arts education. A strengths approach in a collegiate setting ought to lead to more engaged students in the classroom, increased retention, and better positioning to learn strong, live strong and choose positions consistent with their strengths.

Count me among those who do *not* think the Talent Center is a recruiting gimmick. It is consistent with what we know about brain functioning. Its basic research was produced

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<sup>70</sup> Buckingham and Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> Rath, *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, pp.iii.

<sup>72</sup> Buckingham and Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, p. 6.

<sup>73</sup> Rath and Conchie, *Strengths Based Leadership*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>74</sup> Rath, *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, p. 12.

by one of the world's leaders in social science research. It is congruent with the theology of call, vocation, election and giftedness from our United Methodist heritage. It is "resonant" with the values and outcomes of liberal arts learning. And, it is an ally to unlock, strengthen, deepen and intensify the motivation and desire to learn among our students. Why? Because we seek to unleash what lies deep within our students and call forth those talents to help them learn strong.

### **Excurses: A Secular Sense of Call and Vocation.**

The terms call and vocation "drip" with religious language and theological categories. I am comfortable in this conceptual, linguistic and historical world, but what about those who are not? Is our Talent Center only for religious students? Is the concept of call possible without religious sensibilities? I have pondered this question and think it *is* possible to have a strong secular sense of call.

Foundational to a secular sense of call is the realization that one's parents and evolutionary biology gave to each person talent to succeed. The first step in a secular sense of call is to identify and strengthen one's talent. The second sense of call comes from passion and decision. Talent predisposes one to view life in a certain way. Interests, passions, events, and history propel us to discern the field where our talents could best be used. Last, a sense of oughtness and meaning fills out a secular sense of call. Sometimes what we find meaningful is not only what we ought to do but where we have talent and strength to succeed. Often a sense of what we ought to do provides meaning for our lives. Perhaps meaning is discovered from an activity, a human need waiting to be addressed, a painful

experience seeking healing, the joy of discovery or attempting to make a difference in one's sphere of influence. All humans look at the world and see needs, problems and concerns. Perhaps concerns and needs that one consistently sees and is drawn toward are an external call as valid as a theological one.

The wisdom of the ages suggests that each of us must choose and decide what fits our talent, ability, passion and interest. This "calling" must fit the person and the person must fit the call.

I am convinced that a sense of call may be profoundly experienced by both those who are religious and those who are not. Whether the source of call is God or from within, both calls end at the same place. The called, believers and unbelievers, must attend to their unique talents, develop them into strengths, act on a sense of oughtness and in the end, will probably find meaning and effectiveness as they live out their call.

## **V. Integrating Strengths and Learning at Dakota Wesleyan University Implementation Framework for the Center for Talent Development**

### **A. Freshman Year: Discover & Define**

#### **1. Goals**

- a) Students will have a basic understanding of their Top 5 themes
- b) Students will be able to define and verbalize their themes
- c) Students will have established their own concept of their individual themes and their unique combination

- d) Students will have been exposed to definitions of the other 29 themes and will understand the vocabulary of the StrengthsFinder

## **2. Actions**

- a) LST 101 will focus on explaining and getting to know each theme in class
  - (1) CTD Director guest lecture
  - (2) Videos showcasing various themes
- b) One-on-one personal coaching sessions will examine:
  - (1) StrengthsFinder 'buy-in'
  - (2) Understanding & explanation of themes
  - (3) Individual student strategies based on themes
- c) LST 101 Assignments will focus on each students' concept of individual and combinations of themes
- d) Campus programming (Strengths Week, OctDoorber Fest, Tiger Trib featured theme-of-the-week, staff/faculty theme signs) will encourage usage of the vocabulary and familiarity with using the language
- e) Students will submit their self-reflective Strengths Action Plan to their Professional Electronic Portfolio

## **B. Sophomore Year: Develop & Integrate**

### **1. Goals**

- a) Students will be able to see a clear connection between their themes and past/ present behavior
- b) Students will be able to see the influence of their themes in their greatest successes

- c) Students will be able to articulate how their themes affect their interactions with others
- d) Students will be cognizant of challenges their themes present

## **2. Actions**

- a) LST 201 assignments will break down past behavior into stages of life (0-preschool, K-5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>, High School, College)
- b) One-on-one personal coaching sessions will examine:
  - (1) Recognition of early signs of talent (see above)
  - (2) Links between themes and greatest successes
  - (3) Further theme-based student strategies
- c) Students will discuss themes in papers for the class
- d) CTD Director will meet with students to discuss challenges specific to each theme and theme combination; follow-up paper assigned in class
- e) Faculty will be encouraged to begin using strengths-based approaches to assignments, particularly group projects
- f) Student Leaders (STREAK, TRiO Peer Mentors, RAs, etc.) will go through intensive strengths training to help promote better understanding
- g) Students will continue developing their PEP by submitting their strengths theme papers
- h) LST 201 students will complete the Holland Codes inventory, identifying careers they are particularly suited for

## **C. Junior Year: Application**

### **1. Goals**

- a) Students will use their knowledge of strengths to plan, direct, and analyze their education and behavior
- b) Students will begin exploring the application of their themes in potential careers
- c) Students will learn to articulate their strengths in common-day language (interpreting for those unfamiliar with the StrengthsQuest vocabulary)
- d) Students will develop a global understanding of personality diversity as they complete COR 301

## **2. Actions**

- a) Students will meet one-on-one with their LST 301 instructor to discuss the remainder of their time at DWU and their personal educational goals
- b) In LST 301, students will begin identifying ways to apply their strengths in their chosen profession and/or internship *or* begin investigating careers in which their strengths would be called upon.
- c) Through resume and cover letter writing and mock interviews, students will develop a 'layman's explanation' of their strengths and how to apply them in the professional world.
- d) In searching for solutions to the global topic discussed in COR 301, students will discover the power of using strengths to understand and solve problems in the world.

## **D. Senior Year**

### **1. Goals**

- a) Students will discover their best leadership styles by reading *Strengths-Based Leadership* in LST 401.

## **2. Actions**

- a) LST 401 students partner with the McGovern Center for Public Service and Service and Leadership and/or the Kelley Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership to design a senior capstone project that draws on both their strengths and leadership skills.
- b) Students will complete their PEP with the submission of their LST 401 capstone project.

## **E. All Years**

### **1. Goals**

- a) Students will have regular access to information about potential careers and grad schools and the steps necessary to enter their chosen fields
- b) The CTD will promote relationships between current students and successful alumni

### **2. Actions**

- a) A representative from the Mitchell office of the South Dakota Department of Labor will attend finalization in both the fall and spring semesters, offering access to employment opportunities.
- b) The annual Community Plunge event will feature employers seeking part-time employees and/or internships

- c) The CTD will provide transportation to SDACCC's BIG Job Fair in the spring, which provides access to employers seeking interns and full-time professional employees
- d) Information about various Grad School options and application procedures will be available from the CTD office
- e) The CTD will work with the Homecoming Committee and Alumni Relations to coordinate a networking function over homecoming weekend.