Final Reflection

I don’t know if I can put into exact words what I’ve learned at my internship but I know that I have been stretched, challenged, and learned more than I ever expected. I appreciate Sittser’s distinction between calling and career: “a calling often uses a career, though it should never be reduced to a career.” Through this internship I have been able to further discern my distinct calling and how that can be played out in at least one career, for example working as a Chaplain at a homeless shelter. However, I have also learned that a calling does not have to be restricted to a specific career path. Sittser’s definition of a calling as “a God-given purpose to use one’s time, energy, and abilities to serve God in the world,” helps me to realize that one of my callings is to work for justice and healing in the lives of those on the margins.

I find Sittser’s explanation that our calling is already in us, growing out of our temperaments, talents, and life experiences, to be helpful, encouraging, and exciting! This summer I have continued to realize that my heart yearns for justice among the oppressed and for every individual to know that they are loved and valued by a compassionate and grace-filled God. I think my calling involves being a reconciler and expanding the circle of God’s love to include the outsider and those on the margins. I want to live my life as an invitation to others to engage with those who are different than them and hope to be a prophetic voice in the church for justice. I also desire to affirm and recognize the inherent dignity that all humans possess regardless of human standards, hierarchies, and social strata. I desire to help people and myself
reclaim our identity, value, and worth in God and continue to love others as our father has loved us. I know this calling will, as Sittser notes, “force me to realize how messy and complex the world can be” and I will never be able to fully live it out. However, I am excited to be a part of God’s reconciling work on this earth and have already been blessed by the counter cultural relationships God has provided me with.

Specifically through this internship I have been given the opportunity to apply what I have been learning in my reconciliation classes into a real life context. In my classes we discuss the “issue” of homelessness and the practice of relational ministry and through my time at UGM I have gotten to experience both of these things firsthand. Although I have learned a lot about systemic injustices through books I have read for class it has been an entirely different experience to actually hear the stories of why my friends on the streets can’t afford housing and are stuck in a cycle of homelessness. I have learned that there is a diverse spectrum of people living on the streets and that poverty, racism, mental illness, and broken families and relationships are just some of the major contributors to chronic homelessness.

I am also continuing to learn what companionship and ministry of presence involve and look like at UGM. Companionship is defined as a “relationship responsive to suffering and supportive of recovery and wellness.” Through my time at UGM I have come alongside several individuals in their journey to recovery and wholeness. I am not there to fix their problems but to share the journey side by side and create a safe space of mutual dignity and respect. I am learning the gift of listening and that genuine relationships take work, patience, and time. I also realize that I have limits and boundaries and that in order to maintain sustainable ministry I must work hard to keep these. Throughout my time at UGM I have had lots of practice in vocalizing these boundaries and learning how to confront conflict and uncomfortable situations head-on.
Additionally I have learned to build relationships and connect on a deeper level with individuals with mental illness and brain disorders. In order to educate myself more on mental illness I have read lots of books, met with a mental health parish nurse, and asked lots of questions of my friends and supervisor. I am saddened by the myths and stigma that surround individuals with mental illness and feel blessed to be a part of the companionship process.

I don’t think I will ever stop learning that people are just people and that we are all in need of redemption and people to love and care for us just as we are. As I began to come closer and relate more to the guests I understand the importance of the Guest Relations department in treating the guests as holistic individuals and not just more “souls to be saved.” UGM primarily has shown me that we all have a story, the inherent goodness of humanity, the presence of God amidst brokenness and the darkest of circumstances, an innate human desire to be loved and valued, and that things as simple as Karaoke or art day have the potential to spark hope and life in the guests. Some challenges, in this type of ministry involve learning to slow down and not expecting to see immediate results. Ministry with the mentally ill and chronically homeless is not a quick fix but a long process of healing and recovery.

Based on my experiences at UGM some of my professional strengths include initiating tasks, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, willingness to try new things, ability to encourage others, ability to think outside of the box and to be able to be flexible when sudden changes occur. This internship especially helps to develop my ministry skill set and how to engage in healthy relationships with those of the opposite gender. I also have been able to start honing my listening skills and the practice of hearing what others have to say rather than always wanting my voice to be heard. Several skills and abilities need to be improved including patience, knowledge of social services, knowledge and experience in counseling, and ability to preach meaningful and
relatable sermons. Throughout my life I can picture myself in several different but overlapping professions including: Pastor of outreach, social worker, and professor. I am excited to spend the rest of my life further discovering the unique call God has put on my life and the calls he has put on those around me. I hope as more and more Christians better understand their unique call the gospel will be lived out in more genuine and attractive ways! 😊