

Discerning Missionary Life

John thought he had his life figured out. A man of great faith, he lived mission with FOCUS generously as a student on campus, leading bible studies and discipleship groups. Two internships had also opened doors in the corporate world, and a string of leadership positions in his fraternity had proved his ability to lead others. When the offer from a Fortune 50 company came, it felt like confirmation. With a dream job secured and a wedding on the horizon, life seemed to make sense.

But a year and a half into his new job, something in his heart began to ache. The metrics, meetings, and promotions that once excited him began to lose their luster. His heart still burned to be on mission, but despite his experience from college, he was surprised to find himself ill prepared to carry out that mission in his new environment. He was split between two worlds.

John now asked “Why did I choose this path in particular?” He wondered why the peace and purpose he longed for seemed so elusive. These questions drew him into prayer - and in that silence, something unexpected arose: A desire to be a FOCUS Missionary.

Shortly afterward, John filled out an application, attended a FOCUS Interview Weekend, and accepted an offer. Leaving his dream job wasn't a rejection of the goodness of hard work or success, but a response to an even greater desire.

What do you think led John to pursue full time mission with FOCUS? Do you relate to any element of John's story?

The Gift of Missionary Life

Being a FOCUS missionary is one great way of responding radically to Christ's universal invitation to mission (Matthew 28:20). Missionaries share the Gospel full-time in campus or parish settings, inviting others to share in the same joy that they have found in Jesus Christ. While by no means the only way of living out the Great Commission, missionary life with FOCUS is an incredible opportunity to engage more deeply the battle for souls - the battle that will decide what happens to this generation for all eternity.

To prepare them for this great adventure, FOCUS missionaries receive world class formation that makes them some of the most effective lay evangelists in the Church today. In an apostolic age like our own - in which the culture generally opposes both faith and mission - missionaries gain the tools they need to not only remain faithful themselves, but to share the Gospel in the most challenging of environments.

By serving for a few years full time, missionaries are equipped for a lifetime. Their experience as full-time evangelists sets them apart. Far from being a hinderance to a later career or vocation, missionary life prepares men and women to be Christ-like leaders in their future parishes and workplaces, as well as better spouses, parents, priests, or religious.

Discuss: What do you find most attractive about missionary life? What have you personally seen of the impact that FOCUS missionaries have in the places they serve?

Discerning the Call

But how does one know they are called to missionary life? Finding the answer will require discernment. To that end, review the foundational principles of discernment in the article *Seeking God's Will*. Having done this, the task of discerning missionary life merits a few additional considerations.

The first is that, of the three “ways” of discernment that are mentioned in *Seeking God's Will*, any of the three are possible for discerning missionary life. Some may indeed receive a profound and direct call from the Lord (as in the first “way”) - though this is not necessary. For others, discerning missionary life will be more ordinary and take the form of a prudential decision (as in the second “way”). It may be as simple as calmly responding to the urgency of the Great Commission, our personal availability, the good of personal formation, and the joy of laying down our lives for Christ's sake.

We can also hear the Lord's call through consolation and desolation. But it is important to note that for many missionaries, there were points in their discernment when they felt excited about missionary life, and others when they felt great fear or even anxiety. Navigating these varying emotions, which are often greatly impacted by our surroundings, it's important to consistently come back to times when we were at peace and God seemed near - what were we drawn to in that moment? When making any discernment, it's important to remember that God never reveals his will through anxiety or fear.

Discuss: What do you think it would take for you to discern missionary life well?

Obstacles and Misconceptions

A few common obstacles and misconceptions exist that make it difficult to fully and freely discern missionary life.

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One is a misguided starting point. When discerning anything it's natural to ask the question "What will I get out of this?" While it's true that God desires good things *for* us, he cares even more about the kind of people we *become*. Often, we gain a new perspective when we ask, "What kind of person will this make me?" or "What will best make me a saint in this next season of life?" When God's glory and our transformation in Christ begin to consume our desire, we become free to accept His invitations, even if they require real sacrifice from us.

Another common mistake is to discern an unreality, which can come in one of two extremes. The first is to discern an unrealistically negative picture of missionary life, as when we imagine that our friends and family will abandon us, our future career prospects will be ruined, and our mission will utterly fail. The other extreme is an unrealistically rosy picture of missionary life: non-stop fun, perfect team life, thrilling campus placements, adoring and receptive students, and a future spouse thrown in to boot (after the dating fast, of course). Neither of these views are accurate - missionary life is neither dismal nor a field of roses. Rather, missionary life is an adventure in which we experience both joy and hardship in a new way, as Jesus promises all his friends.

It's also possible to have an inaccurate picture of what a FOCUS missionary ought to be like. We might be tempted to think that being a missionary necessitates being an extravert, having a long experience of living the faith, or an impeccable moral past, but many biblical examples contradict this: Moses had a speech impediment, Ruth was a pagan woman, Matthew was a tax collector, and Paul persecuted Christians. God called all of them to serve Him in incredible ways, being transformed themselves in the process.

A final common mistake is to overthink the decision. Being a FOCUS missionary is a serious commitment, but it does not permanently decide the course of our lives. The question is not "what is God asking me to do for the rest of my life?" (as in vocational discernment) but rather, "Is mission the best way I can serve God and others while growing in holiness over these next few years?" After our time on FOCUS staff is over, we will have the opportunity to make another discernment.

Discuss: Have you ever had any of these misconceptions about discerning missionary life?

Take Action

Just like any good discernment, discerning life as a FOCUS Missionary requires counsel, prayer, and action. With that in view, the following are recommended:

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1. Counsel: Seek out spiritual directors, campus ministers, current or past FOCUS missionaries, or others for wise counsel. It isn't practical or necessary to ask anyone and everyone. A few trusted individuals who are mature in their faith, recognize the goodness of missionary life, are motivated by our growth in holiness, and who allow us to decide freely will suffice to support us in good discernment.
2. Prayer: Consider *Lectio Divina* on the following verses from the Gospel of Matthew:
 - Matthew 4:18-22
 - Matthew 16:24-25
 - Matthew 28:18-20
3. Action: Remember, discernment often requires concrete steps. We need not be certain of the path forward before taking some initial steps. Taking the following actions are not a final commitment to missionary life, but simply a way of opening yourself up to the possibility:
 - Attend a FOCUS interest event (if available)
 - Fill out the FOCUS missionary application
 - Attend an Interview Weekend (if invited)

As a final word, we as missionaries would like to show our hand. It's true - not everyone is called to be a FOCUS missionary. Yet, if one has the courage to accept, we feel strongly that those who do so will not regret it. We believe that dedicating oneself to full-time mission will be a great blessing for most people. When we look back at all the blessings and growth we've received from our time on mission, we can only say with gratitude: "Thank God I said yes to being a missionary - how good it was for my character, how good it was for souls."

Because of this, we want you to share in our joy.

What if you said yes?

This is a FOCUS Resource currently in development. We are eager to receive your feedback on it, which you can give at the following link:

<https://forms.office.com/r/3WmTN23nv1>

