

MRC MENTORING COMMUNITY

# NINE TRAIL MARKERS

Conversation guide on pastoral identity

## Nine Conversations

Everyone wants seminary education to have an impact in their lives. Whether it's a deeper spiritual life, more biblical knowledge, ministry skills, or all of the above, we all want the hard work to lead somewhere. Yet graduation is not the final arrival. It is a moment you find yourself at a new trailhead—with new resources. And we are not called to journey alone. God provides us with companions and conversations to help us live into who God says we are.

**“The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”**

- ST. IRANAEUS

Here are nine trail markers to guide you and one other person in a mentoring relationship. These markers and trail guide follow along with New Testament scholar Klyne Snodgrass's research and book, *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity*. Together, you will walk through his nine factors that shape identity.

The goal is not to become whatever your image is of a perfect person. Friendships in ministry give us the support we need to live and live fully. This glorifies God. As Dr. Gary Selby would say, “You are a beloved child of God.” Living out of God's love is our goal. This is true at the beginning, the end, and wherever we find ourselves along the way.

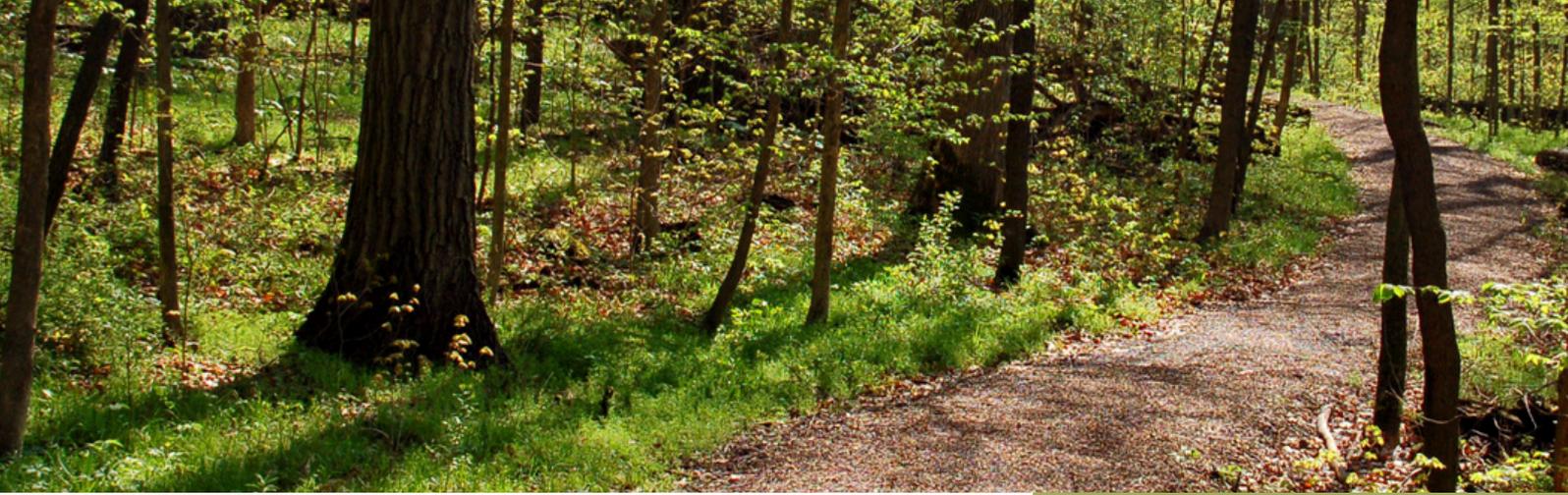
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# At the Trailhead

## LOOKING AT OUR LIFE MAPS

Beginning with intention involves reviewing how we got here. A life map exercise can help. On one page, write or draw a summary of your life or a particular time in your life, such as the last year. Use the following questions to guide you:

Where did you start?

What are the people, places, and institutions that impacted you?

What larger world or cultural events impacted you?

What technological inventions, elections, public celebrations or collective traumas impacted you?

Where did you experience joy?

Where did you grow or find resilience?

Where did you spend the majority of your energy? What values stand out to you?

What values would you like to prioritize moving forward?

Share your life maps with each other.

How would you like to check in with each other throughout the next year, specifically on your answer to prioritizing your values moving forward?

Over the course of this year we will connect each of the nine identity factors with a passage from one of the Apostle Paul's letters. Just like with our life map, Paul's life was also shaped by technological advances, collective traumas, people, places, and institutions. Paul was able to share the gospel with a diverse population because of the ways he had been formed but also transformed by his new call. Paul's encounter with Christ, instruction from Ananias, and companionship with other disciples impacted and sustained his call moving forward.

## ACTS 9:1-17



1. WHERE DO YOU FIND CONNECTION BETWEEN HOW YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE FORMS YOU AND HOW YOU ARE BEING TRANSFORMED BY GOD'S GOOD NEWS?

2. WHERE DO YOU SEE THE IMPORTANT INTERSECTIONS OF YOUR FAITH AND YOUR CULTURAL CONTEXT?



# Trail Marker One

## THE BODY

Our bodies—physical and corporate—are critical to who we are. Yet often we struggle to view them with appreciation and proper perspective. Take some time to reflect on your physical self.

In what ways are you grateful for your body? Is there something your body allows you to do—a hobby, sport, art, or type of work—that you are thankful for? What does play look like for you?

Sabbath practices often include doing something for our bodies because it’s one of the ways we remember that we are beloved. Henri Nouwen writes, “Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us ‘Beloved.’ Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.”

How could you show appreciation for your body?  
How would you like to take up space with your body?

When we think of our body we can also imagine our integration into a group of people, a community. Where do you find yourself “fitting” into a body of believers these days?

How would you like to show up in this body?  
How could you show appreciation for this body?

## ROMANS 12:1-2



1. WHEN HAVE YOU SEEN A BODY OF BELIEVERS EMBODY THE GOOD NEWS?
2. HOW COULD YOU, WITH A BODY OF BELIEVERS, LIVE OUT WHAT IS HOLY AND PLEASING TO GOD?



## Trail Marker Two

### PERSONAL HISTORY

Our personal histories provide an anchor to our lives. How we tell these personal stories and reflect on our past matters to our future. We intuitively attribute meaning to particular moments and give some incidents more weight than others.

Klyne Snodgrass writes, “Our lives are not a series of unconnected events, and something within us longs—is even forced—to create a connected story that makes sense of the pieces and moves us in a successful direction. We create our story from the events and circumstances life hands us, even if we do not do it well. We have a narrative identity.”.

To begin, share one brief story or image that involves your name.

What stories does your family tell to define itself? What themes do you emphasize as you tell your story?

What is the driving force in your story?

What circumstances have prompted change in your life?

## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:8-10



1. WHEN HAVE YOU CHANGED THE WAY YOU TELL A STORY ABOUT YOUR PAST, REFRAMING SOMETHING BAD AS GOOD OR GOOD AS BAD?

2. HOW HAS YOUR FAITH HELPED YOU FORM A NEW IDENTITY?

3. ARE THERE PLACES IN YOUR PERSONAL NARRATIVE WHERE GOD'S GRACE SURPRISED YOU OR WHERE GOD'S GRACE WOULD BE SURPRISING TO OTHERS LISTENING TO YOUR STORY?



## Trail Marker Three

### RELATIONS

We are not who we are alone. Identity is always partly formed through relationships with those around us.

## Christian Identity at its center is grounded in whom you love and who loves you.

KLYNE SNODGRASS

What have been the most important friendships in your life?  
How would you characterize these friendships?  
What have you learned about yourself through a friendship?

Sometimes friendships appear to us as obstacles. Sometimes friendships don't strengthen and encourage, helping us become who we are in Christ, but discourage, distract, or lead astray.

When have your friendships resulted in jealousy?  
When have you struggled to celebrate differences in a friendship?  
When did a friendship end badly?

We are created to love and be loved. Personal faith is the expression of a relationship with God. Our honest participation in faith also brings out our authentic self in relationship with others. Snodgrass writes, "Individual authenticity and relation to God belong together. With God you have ongoing value and freedom to be unique and who you were called to be. God neither desires nor expects you to be like someone else." Healthy relationships bear our true authentic selves. A core part of thriving long term in ministry is having good relationships with those around us, those we serve and work with.

## EPHESIANS 4:2-5

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1. WHAT CAN  
HAVING GOOD  
RELATIONSHIPS  
WITH THOSE WE  
SERVE AND WORK  
WITH LOOK LIKE  
FOR YOU?

2. WHERE DO YOU  
STRUGGLE TO  
BRING YOUR  
HONEST SELF TO A  
SITUATION AND  
HOW WOULD YOU  
LIKE THAT TO  
CHANGE?



# Trail Marker Four

## MIND

We use our mind to process and assess who we are. Mental work is essential to identity.

**To what will you give your mind? You will give it to something. Give it to learning about the good, the true, and the valuable. Give it to honest self-assessment. Give it to God for continual renewal.**

KLYNE SNODGRASS

Snodgrass argues that the process of self-interpretation centers around three interrelated actions: “memory, valuing, and dialogues that take place in and with our mind.”

Memory: What is something you can do that you don’t have to think about? Maybe it’s muscle memory or words to a song. Why do you think this has stayed with you? How we order and remember our past shapes our present and future. Think of someone you love. What is a favorite memory with them that is important to you today? Sometimes our memories are not as trustworthy as we would like them to be. Have you ever had to re-frame a memory?

Valuing: What matters to us shapes our identity. Make a list of the people, things, and places that matter the most to you. What do you feel when you look at this list-gratitude, joy, pressure, or guilt? Does the time and effort you give throughout the week match this list? How can you prioritize what you value?

Dialogue: Internal dialogue is often where we evaluate ourselves and discern how we will remember, act, and make choices. We also have an intercessor, the Holy Spirit, to help us with these internal dialogues and discernment. How do you experience the Spirit’s engagement with you in this process?

Mark E. Thibodeaux in his book, *God’s Voice Within*, writes that getting quiet helps us collect the kind of data we need to self evaluate. What does getting quiet look like for you?

Allow God’s spirit to guide you in these answers and meditate on what has been good, joyful, and encouraged your faith.

## PHILIPPIANS 4:8-9



1. WHAT HAS BROUGHT YOU JOY THIS WEEK?
2. WHERE DID YOU FIND IT LIGHTER TO HAVE FAITH?
3. WHAT WAS CHALLENGING OR DIFFICULT THIS WEEK?



# Trail Marker Five

## COMMITMENTS

**If you love what you should not, you will not love what you should.**

- SENTENCES OF SEXTUS

Our commitments form us and show who we actually are. Through our choices, we show the truth of our love, above and beyond what we say. Think back on a time where you had to train for something, what did commitment look like? How did that impact who you thought you were?

Think again about your body. What commitments are in place because of your body? Think again about your relations. What relationships involve commitments and responsibilities? Some of us don't get to choose where we physically live. Some do. Think about the places to which you have committed in your life. Has commitment to a particular place felt helpful for you or has it caused anxiety or fear?

How do you respond to a high expectation of commitment? Do you think it's right or helpful for Christian communities to have high expectations of commitment from people? Where have you seen healthy and unhealthy forms of this?

Do you think the people in your ministry context feel like they have something important to commit to? Or do you think people feel trapped by their commitments? How does the gospel address such situations and bring freedom?

God commits to us. This commitment is also an invitation to live a virtuous life. Such commitments are really about a particular way of living, not necessarily to a work out plan or a job.

Our identity is always formed by two locations of commitments: our location in the world—geography, town, ministry, community—and our location in Christ.

**We do not come closer to God by changing our place. We come closer to God and to being truly human only by changing the way we think and live as the spirit of God engages us.**

- GREGORY OF NYSSA

## EPHESIANS 5:1-2



1. HOW DOES COMMITMENT TO LIVING OUT THE VIRTUES OF FAITH ORIENT OUR LIVES?

2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE A "LOCATION" IN CHRIST?



## Trail Marker Six

### ACTIONS

**Deliberation is only brought to a close when we care enough about something to stop thinking and act.**

- SØREN KIERKEGAARD

An old question for helping people decide their role on a team used to be, “Are you a thinker, doer, or a dreamer?” Do you find those labels helpful? Do you identify yourself more with one category or does this feel more situational for you? When has moving to “doing” been helpful in your life?

**Faith involves attachment to and participation with Christ.**

- KLYNE SNODGRASS

Our faith is more than a collection of ideas, theories, and statements. We also have agency to live out what comes to us in our prayers and discernment practices.

In the past, what has moved you from a passive “thinking mode” into an acting mode?

Can you think of a time when you acted before you felt you had discerned enough? Did it go well or poorly?

How do you experience God’s action in the world? Are there times when you have felt that your action was aligning with God’s action in the world?

## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:58

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1. WHAT DOES ACTION LOOK LIKE IN THIS STAGE OF YOUR LIFE?

2. WHAT DOES ACTION NEED TO LOOK LIKE IN THIS STAGE OF YOUR LIFE?



# Trail Marker Seven

## BOUNDARIES

**Being is a process of recognizing and establishing some boundaries and of removing others, and life is about negotiating boundaries.**

KLYNE SNODGRASS

Some boundaries can be life-giving and necessary; other boundaries—like those that separate people according to national, ethnic, gender, and economic boundaries—need to be challenged and crossed.

What are some areas of your life where you feel the need for clearer boundaries? These could be boundaries related to your body, your time, your dignity, your work, your vocation, or your spiritual or mental health.

Have you ever had to set a boundary and then later make adjustments? What did that process involve?

Describe a time in your life when you felt a boundary was violated (ie, a time when you felt someone disregarded your person and agency). How did you know a boundary had been crossed? How did you feel and how did you respond?

What harmful boundaries do you see in the life of your community? What conversations would need to happen and who would need to be involved in order to start the process of redrawing those boundaries?

Conversations about boundaries should happen in church. What would this look like for you?

Snodgrass points to our baptism as an example where boundaries are redrawn. The past is the past. The old self is put to death. And we belong to a new kind of family. Think back over your life map and your baptismal story, what was removed and what was gained?

The lectionary and Christian calendar are other examples of rituals that provide boundary making we can return to every year as a way to reorient ourselves.

## 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-8



1. WHAT SPIRITUAL PRACTICES, PERSONAL OR COMMUNAL, HELP YOU LIVE OUT THIS PRACTICE OF BOUNDARY SETTING?

2. WHAT DIFFERENCES CAN YOU IMAGINE FOR YOURSELF IF YOU MARKED TIME THIS WAY?



# Trail Marker Eight

CHANGE

**Change is the only constant.**

KLYNE SNODGRASS

**People don't resist change, they resist loss. We know how to deal with individual loss, but we don't know how to deal with corporate loss. For change to last, it must be a healthy adaptation of the DNA of the group.**

- TOD BOLSINGER

How well do you handle change? Share a time when you were forced to change through a time of loss.  
Share a time when you have witnessed a group handle change or loss well.  
What is changing around you right now, personally and in the communities you are a part of?

What could it look like for you to help others navigate these changes well?

Snodgrass writes that one of the reasons we keep talking about identity and asking "who am I?" is because life keeps changing. Do you find this to be true? How have personal changes impacted how you see yourself?

Not all change happens to us. There is much that we can control in the midst of change to ensure we are taking the most helpful next right step. How can we prepare for change and evaluate change as it's happening?

**The truth is, you are more than you presently are, and God wants you to be more than you presently are. There is a summoning self calling us.**

KLYNE SNODGRASS

Often this voice is connected to good relationships and community voices speaking into our lives or testing the voice alongside us. Sometimes the change this summoning self calls for is dramatic, leading you to a new location, relationship, or vocation. Other times it is quieter, calling you to be where you are but with a changed perspective.

## COLOSSIANS 1:9-14



1. WHO IS YOUR  
SUMMONING  
SELF INVITING  
YOU TO BE?

2. WHAT IS THE  
VOICE OF YOUR  
SUMMONING  
SELF SOUNDING  
LIKE RIGHT NOW?



# Trail Marker Nine

## THE FUTURE

All nine identity factors work together and impact our future. Our bodies, our personal stories and histories, our relations, our commitments, our actions, our self-interpretations and memory, our boundaries and our ongoing process of change all impact, enable, and limit our future.

**Because, of course, how we spend our days is how we spend our lives.**

- ANNIE DILLARD

Imagine a future where you are ‘spending your days’ the way you want to ‘spend your life.’ Describe it.

**What will—note the future tense—give real and lasting value?**

- KLYNE SNODGRASS

Theologian Martin Buber tells the story of Rabbi Zusya when he realized that “God would not ask, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ But ‘Why were you not Zusya?’ Each of us will be asked, ‘Why were you not who you were created to be?’”

What images of yourself and who you “supposed to be” have you had to give up to live into who God has made you to be?

What is the next step in letting go of those images to live more deeply into who God created you to be?

What possibilities for the future might open as you compare yourself less with others or cultural ideals of who we think we should be and celebrate the gifts and abilities you have?

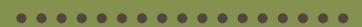
The future is now. Christianity brings a new orientation to time where the future is always breaking into the present and redeeming the past.

**The future provides us with the “sense of being engaged in the ongoing work God is doing, something that is not yet complete but in process, something that is bigger than we are, and something of significance beyond the grave.**

- KLYNE SNODGRASS

We are humans engaged with God because we are created in God’s image. We are God’s beloved. And we “live from hope.”

## HEBREWS 11:13-16



1. WHERE DO YOU FIND YOURSELF ENGAGED IN THE ONGOING WORK GOD IS DOING IN THE WORLD?
2. HOW ARE YOU INVESTING YOUR LIFE IN WAYS THAT FEEL SIGNIFICANT BEYOND THE GRAVE?



## Closing Reflections

1. What markers on the trail have been the most helpful for you?
2. Where did you find the connection between how life formed you and how you're being transformed by God's good news?
3. Where do you see the important intersections of your faith and your ministry context?
4. After walking through these nine trail markers, what do you hope for the future? What story would you like to tell or add to your life map a year from now?
5. You are God's beloved. How will you continue to embrace this truth?

### RESOURCES FOR GOING DEEPER:

1. Klyne Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity*. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2018.
2. Mark Thibodeaux, *God's Voice Within: The Ignatian Way to Discover God's Will*. Loyola Press, 2010.
3. Tim Bomgardner and Jane Wasem, *The Long View Podcast* with interviews on vocational discernment with Emmanuel alumni and sponsored by the MRC.
4. The Ministry Resource Center website and newsletter with articles and ministry reflections from Emmanuel faculty, alumni, and friends.