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For immediate release

Ouachita's Ben Utter among 22 faculty nationwide to attend NetVUE seminar on vocation

By Rachel Moreno

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ARKADELPHIA, Ark.—Ouachita Baptist University's Dr. Ben Utter, assistant professor of English, represented Ouachita faculty at the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education's (NetVUE) "Teaching Vocational Exploration" seminar held this summer in Chicago. Utter was one of 22 faculty members from around the country selected to attend.

An initiative of the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), NetVUE is a nationwide network of colleges and universities that seeks to catalyze the intellectual and theological exploration of vocation among undergraduate students. NetVUE's weeklong seminar this summer gathered faculty representing various faiths and academic disciplines – including business, chemistry, physics, psychology and theology – to discuss parallels between the pursuits of an education as well as a vocation.

"The seminar's purpose was to help professors understand and embrace the language and concepts of vocation, or calling, in order to help students answer the 'What on earth should I do with my life?' question, or perhaps to help them ask it," Utter said.



After completing an intensive application process and essay detailing their teaching philosophies, faculty accepted to attend the seminar were assigned reading material relating to vocation and higher education and asked to provide written responses prior to their arrival. Their analyses were then shared with other seminar participants.

"Perhaps the most stirring part of the seminar was its emphasis on the ways in which vocation must be grounded in friendship, which, after all, calls us out of ourselves," Utter said. "Discerning and answering a calling requires a community of friends to walk beside us, to offer us, in the words of one speaker, 'an itinerary of hope.'"

As a Christ-centered learning community, Ouachita joined the CIC in 2018. Soon after, Dr. Amy Sonheim, professor of English at Ouachita, applied for and secured a NetVUE professional development grant for the university. As a result, Ouachita faculty and staff conducted a year-long study of vocation during the 2018-2019 school year to discuss in depth the university's mission statement – to prepare individuals for "lives of meaningful work."

"It turns out that what Ben discovered in Chicago with faculty from around the country paralleled some of our key on-campus discoveries about vocation," Sonheim said. "At Ouachita, faculty and staff believe that

a person discovers her vocation relationally, living and working in community. Our faculty and staff said that in order to know what God wants us to do in the future, we say 'yes' to Him in the present, with even the smallest of tasks, such as completing homework."

In continuing the study of vocation, Sonheim said Ouachita faculty concluded that their students "felt confused on how to link academic work to work after graduation."

"The faculty and staff discovered that before we could talk about integrating faith and work after college, we needed to persuade ourselves of the spiritual and intrinsic value of our academic work during college," she added.

When NetVUE announced a highly competitive summer seminar that focused on linking academic study with God's calling, Sonheim nominated Utter.

"Energetic and generous, Ben had been actively participating in the book discussions on vocation all along," Sonheim said. "Ben being chosen for this prestigious seminar was quite an honor for Ouachita, as we were the proverbial new kid in the class. I knew that Ben's listening and communicating skills would serve his colleagues well."

"I returned home from the seminar determined to help my students see their vocation (which can include but is by no means limited to job or career) as something vital, something life-giving," Utter said. "This experience has helped deepen my conviction that to be an effective professor means not just teaching my subject competently, but also bearing witness to my students' lives, dedicating myself to their good and taking joy in their flourishing."

Dr. Utter is a 2002 English and political science Ouachita graduate. He earned his master's degree in English from Wake Forest University in 2008 and completed his Ph.D. in English from the University of Minnesota in 2016, with a concentration in medieval studies. His current projects include co-editing a forthcoming issue of the journal *Review & Expositor* on the topic, "Baptists, Bullets, and the Bible."

To hear more about Dr. Utter's discoveries about vocation, interested individuals – both on- and off-campus– are invited to attend his presentation for Ouachita's Faculty Colloquium on Wednesday, Oct. 30, at 12 noon in Walker Conference Center, Room C.

For more information about Dr. Utter's colloquium or Ouachita's NetVUE grant and study of lives of meaningful work, contact Dr. Amy Sonheim at sonheima@obu.edu or (870) 245-5552.