

**TOGETHER in
CHRIST**



A JOURNEY OF FAITH
USA National Conference



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Reflective Questions and Spiritual Practices

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USA National Conference

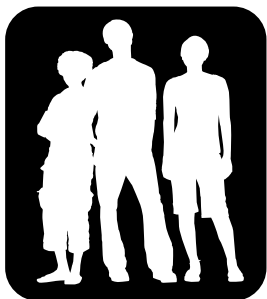
Reflective Questions and Spiritual Practices

The church in the USA has been invited to prepare for the National Conference by engaging in prayerful reflection, respectful conversation, and receptive spiritual practices. This invitation centers on our ongoing call as a prophetic people who listen for the divine mind, will, and purpose in all significant decisions and mission endeavors. We are called to travel together as we gather, learn, listen, and worship in the spirit of Christ.

This resource is a guide for our initial period of prayerful reflection and preparation. In recent years the church has been asked to use principles of discernment in decision making and ongoing discipleship formation. We are growing in our understanding of discernment as a spiritual practice and way of life. We also confess we have much to learn about the Christian tradition and discipline of discernment. In our preparation for the National Conference we again are invited to be discerning as we seek God's guidance on issues before the church.

We will not use all the elements and steps of structured discernment processes found in specific Christian models. However, the attitudes and practices of discernment will be essential to our journey. This resource is designed to:

- Provide questions and spiritual practices that foster deep receptivity to God's "will" regarding the issues before the conference.
- Encourage spiritual friendship and relational sharing that support unity and diversity in the body of Christ.
- Deepen our understanding of discernment and move the church toward a particular Community of Christ pattern or model for seeking God's "will."



For Youth/Youth Groups

Look for additional ideas for young people or youth groups in this resource.

Our Journey with Discernment

Community of Christ has a long tradition of revelatory experience based in prayerfully seeking God's "will" or call. We know something about asking God for wisdom and greater truth.

Recent counsel to the church invites us to learn more, go deeper in our relationship with God, and grow into mature discipleship as a prophetic people. Listen to the Voice. Create sacred community. Seek encounters with the Divine. Be shaped into the holistic peace of Christ. Be spiritually formed and follow Christ on the inner and outer paths of transformation. Look to the scriptures and the sacraments. Center your lives on the vision of God's shalom, the peaceable kingdom; Zion, the beautiful, which is the divine call of the Restoration.

Discernment language has increased in the church as we have listened for what matters most to God. As a community of disciples called to the vision of God's shalom embodied in Jesus Christ, the question is always: What does God want for us and the creation?

The deepest discernment question in our hearts needs to be: "What does God yearn for?" The Enduring Principles of Community of Christ state it clearly: "God wants shalom (justice, reconciliation, well-being, wholeness, and peace) for all of creation." The larger goal of discernment is to recognize and join God's redemptive activity of restoring creation to wholeness and joy.

—*Yearning for God*

www.CofChrist.org/discernment/YearningForGod.pdf

God is the divine weaver, and shalom is the pattern God calls us to discern. Jesus embodied God's shalom for us. Early every morning he spent time in solitude with God...Jesus discerned and surrendered to God's presence and purpose.

—*Yearning for God*

Prophetic people are persistently attentive to God's purposes and longings. Our central passion is to hear and do the will of God in the manner of Jesus. Discernment is an essential spiritual practice for holistic discipleship.

From Jesus we learn that discernment is a life orientation toward God and God's dream. Discernment is a way of life for disciples because it is the way Jesus lived. This understanding of discernment as a lifelong pursuit of God and God's purpose is the basis for all other definitions and approaches to discernment.

—*Yearning for God*

Discernment for disciples is focused receptivity toward God's will. Discernment also is a way to seek spiritual guidance for decisions in our personal lives or the body of Christ.

—*Yearning for God*

The following definition is more specific about the meaning and practice of discernment.

Discernment is an intentional way of opening to God's will. It is a prayerful, reflective process focused on understanding God's call at a particular time. It is a structured way of listening through reason, scripture, faith, prayerful reflection, and interactions with God's people and world.

—*Yearning for God*

The essential ingredient in discernment is a tenacious, unyielding focus on seeking God's desires and call above all else. Discernment happens when we shift our attention from what we want and think to what God knows and desires. Shifting our full attention to God's call or will is called "holy indifference." Becoming indifferent (letting go of or surrendering) to what we want is necessary if we are to seek and prefer what God may want for us.

Cultural and spiritual diversity make it possible for different understandings of God's will and different images of shalom (wholeness in zionic community) to exist in the body of Christ.

We don't always agree about God's call or the vision of shalom. We disagree about which threads belong in God's design. Discernment helps us distinguish what threads (decisions/directions) are faithful to God's yearnings for shalom and what the pattern of Christ's peace is to look like in our community.

—*Yearning for God*

Unity in diversity is made possible by setting aside personal opinions and preferred outcomes to seek the pattern God wants to create in us. This is difficult work that invites us to deeper relationship with God and receptivity to the Spirit. Spiritual practices are tools that help us learn Christ's way of radical attention and love toward God.

Through spiritual disciplines of attention and listening, we discern...our call to help create shalom. We see more clearly the threads and colors of Christ's peace...Deepening our spiritual life and practice allows God to shape us as prophetic people...

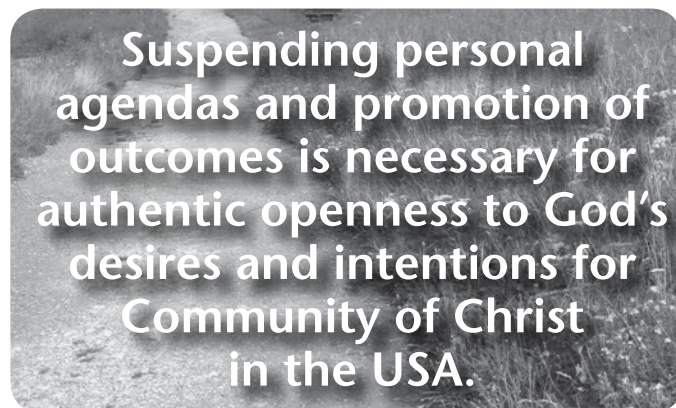
—*Yearning for God*

A Covenant for the Journey

We desire and seek a divinely inspired way forward for the issues before the church in the USA. In the context of diverse views on priesthood and marriage policies, we trust God to lead us toward creative, healing outcomes beyond those we currently perceive or propose. We begin the journey not knowing the outcome and trusting one another to remain open to the divine surprise of Spirit-inspired possibilities.

No matter what perspective individuals or congregations hold on issues coming before the National Conference, we invite all members, leaders, and congregations to suspend promotion of final outcomes while seeking God's wisdom and guidance together.

Suspending personal agendas and promotion of outcomes is necessary for authentic openness to God's desires and intentions for Community of Christ in the USA. It is the covenant of those in the community to faithfully follow the pattern of Christ by saying to God: "Not my will, but yours."



We seek God's "will," recognizing the mind and purposes of God are beyond our complete comprehension. The invitation is to sincerely and humbly become vulnerable to the Spirit's outpouring and listen for our best understanding of the divine intent.

Our tradition calls us to honor the worth and perspectives of all persons. Mutually attentive listening and honest, respectful speech must mark our relationships and communication. The unity and blessings of Christ-like community are of highest importance to our journey with God.

A Developing Model for Seeking God's Will

President Veazey prayerfully has considered the elements and relationships of a holistic pattern for seeking God's will. For discovering God's purposes he has created a Community of Christ model (see "Ways of Discovering God's Will" on page 4) that provides guidance and structure to our growing understanding of discernment. Please access the



presentation of President Veazey's work as preparation for engaging the questions and spiritual practices (www.CofChrist.org/usaconf).

President Veazey's model helps us realize that seeking God and God's purposes is our central calling. The illuminating light of the Spirit can reveal divine purposes through several windows opened through spiritual attention and practices. Our response to what the Spirit reveals is to incarnate or embody the divine impulse in the manner of Jesus.

Guidelines for Individual or Group Use of Reflection Questions and Spiritual Practices

1. To go deeper in contemplation, individuals or groups are to use the reflection questions and spiritual practices over an extended time. The time frame for using this resource

should be three to six months. A particular focus for each phase includes four reflection periods with spiritual practices.

- **Phase 1:** What is our understanding of and experience with discernment? What are our expectations for seeking God's guidance together?
- **Phase 2:** How do the scriptures guide our efforts to discover God's will? What spiritual practices help open the window of scripture to the light of the Spirit?
- **Phase 3:** How do we understand healthy relationships? How do we discover God's intentions and hopes for healthy relationships in Community of Christ?

2. Individuals or small groups should set their own pace in moving through the phases of reflection and spiritual practices. Take more time on specific phases, questions, or practices as needed.

3. We recommend that groups using the materials have a designated facilitator with pastoral listening skills and a background in spiritual formation and/or group facilitation.
4. Individuals may want to set aside time daily or weekly to encounter one or more reflection questions through the recommended spiritual practice.
5. Groups will want to choose meeting times, and the facilitator should guide the group's use of questions and practices. The questions may be taken separately or as a whole and be reflected on with the recommended spiritual practices.
6. Groups may choose to engage in the spiritual practice together or in private. We encourage confidential sharing of responses to questions and spiritual practices in the context of compassionate listening and spiritual friendship. Attentive seeking of God's Spirit and listening in love and respect are the intents of the groups, rather than debate, opinion sharing, or problem solving.

Many spiritual practices are drawn from the online Community of Christ resource, *Yearning for God* (www.CofChrist.org/discernment/YearningForGod.pdf). Additional spiritual practices are available on the church website's Disciple Formation Guide (www.CofChrist.org/dfg) and the Spiritual Formation web page (www.CofChrist.org/spiritualformation/practices.asp).

For Youth/Youth Groups



If you are unfamiliar with spiritual practices, begin with reading *Yearning for God*, available at www.CofChrist.org/discernment/YearningForGod.pdf, and using the video-based resource "Learning to Recognize God" at www.CofChrist.org/discernment/learning.asp.

If you are a youth minister helping young people prepare, you may wish to adapt "Let the Spirit..." lessons, available at www.CofChrist.org/camphelps/LettheSpirit/Youth.pdf, and share these in a class setting. Groups may want to use social media to encourage use of these reflective questions, discernment, and spiritual disciplines to overcome issues like travel distances or finding a common time. Your group can create a Facebook page on which the questions and activities in this resource can be shared weekly or monthly. Group members can respond with writings, prayers, and further questions.

Entering the Journey: Phase 1

Scripture, prophetic guidance, knowledge, and discernment in the faith community must walk hand in hand to reveal the true will of God. Follow this pathway, which is the way of the Living Christ, and you will discover more than sufficient light for the journey ahead.

—Doctrine and Covenants 163:7d

Prepare by reading the introduction to this resource and viewing the web presentation of President Veazey's model for seeking God's will (www.CofChrist.org/usaconf). Facilitators may want to summarize the resource introduction and then invite the group to view President Veazey's web presentation together.

Pray and reflect with the questions below during Phase 1. Take the questions with you into the designated spiritual practice for each reflection period. The group's agreed-on meeting schedule determines the length of each reflection period.

Share responses, experiences, spiritual stories, and insights as led by your group facilitator. Individuals may want to record experiences in a journal or find ways to share with loved ones and friends.

Questions for Prayerful Reflection

- Where are you in your journey with discernment as a dimension of your discipleship? What is your response to President Veazey's model? What insights does it add to your understanding of seeking and discovering God's will?
- When and how have you tried to seek God's guidance or discern God's call? What did you do to help you listen more deeply to the Spirit? What happened as a result?
- What may change in your relationship with God if you enter a journey of listening for what God yearns for? How might this affect your relationship with others and yourself?
- What feelings or expectations do you have about the church in the USA entering into a process of seeking God's will as we journey toward the USA National Conference?

Reflection Period 1

Spiritual Practices— Solitude and Journaling

- **Group activity:** Invite members to experiment with short periods of solitude; reflect on experiences (blessings and resistances) in the next group gathering.
- **Group activity:** Pray with one of the questions, write in journals, share if desired.
- **Facilitator note:** At the end of the session, assign the practice of “Gathering Information” for the next session. Come ready to focus on your experience, not on “answers” or opinions.

Solitude: Create Sacred Time and Space

Discernment is a conversation between you and God. It is an intimate process. To discern as Jesus did means finding ways to be alone with God. Choose a time of day for solitude. Choose a location in or near your home for prayer. Create a pattern of being alone in this place each day. When we make spaces for God, we discern God’s loving presence with us throughout the day. We draw closer to God.

For Youth/Youth Groups



Some young people will not be used to quiet and solitude. Many have schedules that are intense and complex, similar to those of adults. In a group setting, start with soft instrumental music and slowly fade it out. Another option is to have only two minutes of solitude or si-

lence and gradually increase the length at each gathering if you have opportunities for multiple meetings.

Keep a Spiritual Journal

Journaling helps us record prayers, feelings, questions, experiences, thoughts, insights, images, dreams, and memories. God can “speak” to us in any and all of these ways. Writing them becomes part of the conversation with God. Surprising insights can come through writing. Journals are private, so we can be completely honest with God and ourselves.

Buy a small journal or notebook, or use any paper you can find. Write as a daily spiritual practice or when you have a specific question, experience, prayer, or scripture you want to record.

For Youth/Youth Groups



If you are not familiar with journaling, begin with writing down scripture verses and explaining why they are important to you. Other options include rewriting the passage as it speaks to you (in your own words) or describing how you can apply it to life today.

Reflection Period 2

Spiritual Practice—Gather Information: Learn and Let Go

- **Group activity:** Invite group to suspend current perspectives and prayerfully explore diverse views on issues before the conference. Using the practice below and President Veazey’s model, invite a prayerful gathering and learning process.
- **Facilitator note:** Focus the group’s sharing on experiences (struggles or insights) with letting go of current views and openly seeking new information. Sharing should *not* focus on the pros and cons of issues or turn into debate or opinion sharing.



Gather Information: Learn and Let Go

To discern we must be willing to learn. We give up our answers to become sincere seekers of God’s wisdom. For a particular issue or question we gather information, study, research, read, and check the Internet. We gather facts from reliable sources, look at all sides of the issue rather than only information that supports our view, and learn all we can about the perspectives of those who hold different opinions. We look for connecting links and common ground and ask questions to clarify and understand the perspectives of others. We pray over the information and views we gather and discuss with wise, open-minded friends.

Hold up this sorting and sifting to God in prayer and finally release it. In quiet listening prayer or meditative walking, set the data and information aside and trust God to work in us through all we have learned.

For Youth/Youth Groups



Youth and young adults may have a different take than older adults on the issues before the conference. Of course, not all young people think the same way. As you begin discussing, consider whether the dialogue is intergenerational, or if groups are meeting in age-related cohorts.

Recognize that family, friends, the church, media, and society, influence every person differently. At the beginning or ending of this activity, share in an affirmation circle. Participants pair up, one sitting with eyes closed, while the other stands behind. Those standing place their hands on the shoulders of those sitting and share a short statement of affirmation. (“You are loved by God.” “You are an important part of our community.”) Then the participants change places and repeat the process.

Reflection Period 3

Spiritual Practice—Walk in Nature

- **Group activity:** If possible include a walk in nature in the session. Meet indoors to prepare for the practice and then do the walk. Return to journal and share. If access to nature is not possible, create an indoor walk with nature stations (simple objects) to pray with.

Walk in Nature

Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) said, “Every creature is a word of God and a book about God.” The natural world is a revelation of God. Nature can calm, quiet, and heal us. It is a good place to discern God’s presence and wisdom. Choose a time and place to walk in a quiet natural setting. If you live in a city, find a park or a quiet street. Allow 20 minutes or longer for walking.

Release any discernment questions during your walk. Give your questions to God and trust God to be in and around you as you walk. Ask God to give you eyes to see and ears to hear signs of God.

Begin walking with reverence and gratitude. Stop and spend time if a plant, leaf, insect, flower, cloud, tree, animal,



Photo by Jim Hannah

bird, stone, or pool of water draws your attention. Touch, smell, look, and listen. See if it has something to teach you. How does this natural object make you more aware of God and yourself? What insights come to you?

For Youth/Youth Groups



Walking is one way we can involve our bodies in a spiritual practice. For centuries people have involved body movement—kneeling, standing, hand movements, and dancing—in prayers and worship. What creative ways can you move to the Spirit? Perhaps you can sing a chorus from a song.

Youth groups may want to walk on a prepared trail with stations that focus on some elements from this activity. While walking, turn questions over to God and trust God. “God, give me eyes to see you, ears to hear you.” Include other ways that you open yourself to God.

Reflection Period 4

Spiritual Practice—Listening Prayers

- **Group activity:** Briefly describe listening prayers as creating a receptive space for God through attentive breath-

ing and an anchoring prayer word or phrase. Choose a listening prayer (see below) for the group to do together, or provide handouts and allow group members to choose different listening prayers. Pray and share.

The Jesus Prayer

This prayer is an ancient spiritual practice from Orthodox Christianity. It is a way of connecting with the gracious spirit of Christ as we ask to receive his mercy. The prayer comes from the scripture of the blind man calling Jesus to heal him.

- Silently enter prayer and let your breath become slow and even.
- Greet God and then take up the prayer phrase: *Lord, Jesus Christ* (as you breathe in)...*have mercy on me* (as you breathe out).
- Prayerfully repeat these words for five to 10 minutes. Breathe the presence of Christ into your mind, heart, and body. Be transformed as you receive the compassionate, peaceful heart of Jesus.

Breath Prayers

Breath is a sign, symbol, and word for Spirit. In breath prayer we breathe God's Spirit in and out with a prayer phrase. One pattern is to pray one of God's names as you breathe in. And as you breathe out, use a prayer phrase that tells God your need or longing. For example: *Loving God* (as you breathe in) and *I want to serve you* (as you breathe out). Or pray, *Holy Friend* (as you breathe in) and *heal me* (as you breathe out). Breathe in and out as you repeat the prayer you have discerned in silence for five minutes or longer. Let go of the words and be still when you can.

The scriptures below (and many others) become breath prayers when we silently repeat them in rhythm with our breathing. Remember to focus on opening to God's presence and listening for God's voice. Silently pray the first half of the prayer as you slowly breathe in. Pray the second half as you gently breathe out. (Use examples or choose your own prayer phrase.)

- Be still and know—that I *am* God (Psalms 46:10 KJV).
- We are (I am) the clay—you are the potter (Isaiah 64:8 NIV).
- Create in me—a clean heart, O God (Psalm 51:10 IV).
- The light (of God)—is in all things (Doctrine and Covenants 85:3b adapted).
- Peace—be with you (Doctrine and Covenants 81:6c).
- Let the Spirit—breathe (Doctrine and Covenants 162:2e).
- Be vulnerable—to divine grace (Doctrine and Covenants 163:10b).

For Youth/Youth Groups



Teaching young people listening and breath prayers is a way to introduce praying as a spiritual discipline, rather than a list of requests to God. What key phrase from scripture or from a song is especially meaningful to them?

Scripture: Phase 2

Prepare by reviewing the Community of Christ scripture statement at www.CofChrist.org/ourfaith/scripture.asp.

Pray and reflect with the questions provided below for Phase 2 on scripture. Take the questions with you into the designated spiritual practice for each reflection period.

Share: responses, experiences, spiritual stories, and insights as led by your group facilitator. Individuals may want to record experiences in a journal or find appropriate ways to share with loved ones and friends.

Scripture is vital to the church, but not because it is inerrant (in the sense that every detail is historically or scientifically correct). Scripture makes no such claim for itself. Rather, generations of Christians have found scripture simply to be trustworthy in keeping them anchored in revelation, in promoting faith in Christ, and in nurturing the life of discipleship. For these purposes, scripture is unfailingly reliable.

—Affirmation Five of “Scripture in Community of Christ”

www.CofChrist.org/OurFaith/scriptures.asp

Scripture reflection is essential to discernment. Faith and practice are grounded in scripture. People hold diverse views of what scripture is and says and how it is to be used. Our diverse views come from different understandings of God. Following are some ways people approach scripture:

Literal: All Scriptures are accurate historically and literally true.

Legalist: Scriptures are laws for living and are consulted as guides for moral and behavioral conduct.

Historical-critical (contextual): Scriptures develop in cultural and historical human contexts that affect their content and interpretation.

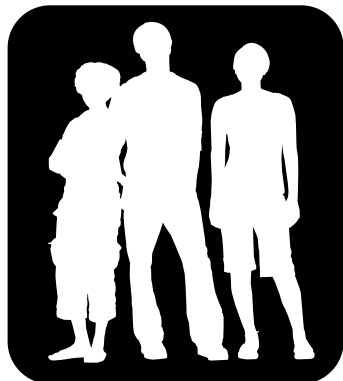
Metaphorical: Scriptural interpretation focuses on metaphorical or symbolic meanings more than emphasizing correct historical and literal meanings.

Devotional: Scriptures are to be encountered as reflective meditations for spiritual growth aside from literal, metaphorical, or historical interpretations.

Literary: Scripture has authority and relevance as a classic work of literature.

—Conditions of Membership Resource
www.CofChrist.org/cofm/Resources.asp

For Youth/Youth Groups



First and foremost, scriptures are story about God's interaction with people. It is important to understand when we ask "what scripture..." that we are asking "what part of God's story...." It's also significant to participate in reading scripture in community and understand we

are part of God's continuing story.

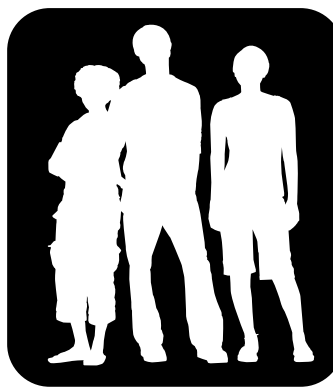
Before tackling the following questions, it's important to hold a class on Community of Christ scripture, including the exploration of the text and basic background about each book. You also may study the article *A Calling to the Soul-work of a Lifetime* by Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith at www.CofChrist.org/D&C164/feb2011_chvala-smith.asp.

Questions for Prayerful Reflection

- What is your view of scripture and its place in your spiritual life? When and how have you used scripture to help you seek God's guidance or call?
- What scriptures are most meaningful and important to you and why? What scriptures do you perhaps find confusing, disturbing, or contradictory? How do the different views of scripture address possible inconsistencies?
- What scriptures affect your perspectives on same-gender relationships? What views of these scriptures (including your own) do you feel are possible or appropriate? How comfortable or uncomfortable do you feel hearing diverse views on these scriptures?
- What guidance do Doctrine and Covenants 163 and 164 offer for our interactions with biblical texts and Restoration scripture? In what ways can we apply this guidance to our journey toward the 2012 USA National Conference?
- How does the Spirit interact with us when we pray with the scriptures? What does God long for us to understand about the nature and application of scripture?

Reflection Periods 1–4 *Spiritual Practices—Sacred Reading (Lectio Divina) and Journaling*

- **Group activity, period 1:** Share the background information on views of scripture. Invite prayerful reflection and/or journaling on personal views of scripture. Share as desired.
- **Group activity, periods 2–4:** Select a short scripture text each meeting and facilitate group *lectio divina* below. Create groups of four and follow instructions provided. Prayerfully choose texts offering guidance, reassurance, and insight (examples: Jeremiah 29:11–14, sections of Psalm 139, etc.).
- **Encourage** personal use of sacred reading during the week and sharing of experiences during sessions. Invite the group to share changing views of scripture as members engage in these practices of praying the scriptures.



For Youth/Youth Groups

Lectio divina is one of many ways to approach scriptures devotionally rather than in a study or cognitive manner. In a devotional approach, our goal is to encounter God's presence through scripture, rather than just to know more

completely what the scripture means. Both approaches are important for spiritual transformation.

Sacred Reading (*Lectio Divina*)

This practice invites us to let God's word soak into mind, emotions, body, and spirit through repeated reflective reading. Read a selected scripture verse or short passage at least four times.

1. Read for understanding (*lectio*) and spend time in silence, reflecting on the meaning of this text.
2. Read for deeper comprehension and reflective questioning (*meditatio*). What is the purpose of this text? What is being said and why?
3. Read the text again and pray (*oratio*) about emotions, personal applications, or invitations you perceive.
4. Read the text and enter a period of receptive silence (*contemplatio*). Rest in God's presence. Say a grateful "amen."

Group *Lectio Divina*: Praying with Scripture

1. Prepare to receive God's word by sitting comfortably alert, with eyes closed or looking at a candle with an unfocused gaze, centering yourself with relaxed breathing.
2. Hear the word addressed to you. Have one person read a short selection (about three to five verses) of scripture one time, simply to get the sequence and detail of the scripture.
3. Read the scripture again. Listen for a word or phrase that draws your attention. Repeat the word or phrase gently to yourself in the minute of silence following the reading. The facilitator will signal the end of the silence. All persons have an opportunity to say aloud, without elaboration, the word or phrase that attracted their attention. (Or they may pass.)
4. Ask, "How is my life touched?" Have another person read the passage again. In the two to three minutes of silence, listen to discover how this passage touches your life today. You may receive a sensory impression or simply reflect on how this passage might be speaking to your life. When the leader gives the signal, briefly share a sentence or two, perhaps beginning with the words I hear, I see, I sense. (Or you may pass.)
5. Ask, "Is there an invitation here for me?" Have a third person slowly read the passage again. In two to three minutes of silence, listen to discover God's invitation or encouragement toward a behavior or action relevant to the next few days or week. When the leader gives the signal, speak of your sense of invitation. (Or you may pass.)
6. Pray for one another's empowerment to respond. Pray, aloud or silently, for God to help the person on your right respond to the invitation received. The leader begins by praying for the person on his or her right, after which the person on the leader's left prays for the leader, and so on around the circle. Whether your prayer is aloud or silent, end with an "amen" to signal when it is the next person's turn.

—Adapted from *Gathered in the Word*.
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Healthy Relationships: Phase 3

For this phase the focus is on relational spiritual practices. How are relationships changed by practices like Ashes and Oil or Holding in the Light (found on page 12)? What needs for peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit emerge? How can such practices help the church in its journey toward

the conference? What does the Spirit say to us about the depth and quality of our relationships as we travel together in community?

Questions for Prayerful Reflection:

- What is your best understanding of God's vision of wholeness for human relationships? What is your experience with relationships that created wholeness, healing, or Christ-like peace? How, when, and why did this take place?
- How would you describe healthy relationships in different areas of life? What personal experiences with family, friends, or culture have shaped your definition of healthy relationships?
- What qualities or conditions are necessary for healthy relationships? What does Doctrine and Covenants 164:5–6 offer to our understanding of healthy relationships?

Reflection Period 1

Spiritual Practice—The Prayer of Examen

- **Group activity:** Invite the group to enter the prayer with specific intent to examine relationships and interactions in the light of God's love. Journal and share as desired.

The Prayer of *Examen*: Examination of Awareness

Examen is a Latin word meaning examination. Usually done in the evening, the *examen* invites us to review our day with God. The goal is to notice God's activity and presence in our day and be aware of our responses. When learning to discern, the prayer of *examen* teaches us to pay attention to where and how God speaks and moves in our lives. St. Ignatius of Loyola developed this prayer as an essential discernment practice.

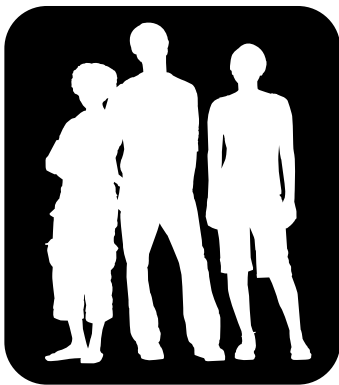
- Become silent and turn your attention toward God. Humbly ask God to help you remember your day clearly and honestly (period of silence).
- Express thanks for the many blessings of life and this day (prayer pause).
- Review your day with an awareness of God's presence. Think over your activities, conversations, thoughts, and feelings. When or where did you recognize God? When

did you act in a Christ-like way? When did you fail to act in a Christ-like way (period of silent reflection)?

- Let God's forgiving love rest on you and the actions and words of the day (pause). Release the day to God's grace and turn toward tomorrow. Set your intention to be more aware of God's presence and to live the day more as Jesus would (silence).
- End your prayer with gratitude for the gift of this day and commit to becoming more conscious of God's activity and presence in future days.
- Write in a journal, which can help with this prayer. What do you notice each day or over time? In what ways are you more aware of God? What do you discern about your questions and God's call to you?

Group activity: Describe the prayer and its purpose. Slowly read steps with several minutes of silence between for prayer and reflection. Invite journaling and/or oral sharing at the end of the prayer. Each person's prayer is private, but encourage sharing about experiences and insights.

For Youth/Youth Groups



Alternative questions for the prayer of *examen* may help young people participate and respond¹: What are some things you've done this week that made you feel fully alive? What has been the highlight of your week? Have you experienced anything lately that has robbed you

of joy? What was the most discouraging thing to happen to you this week?

Reflection Period 2

Spiritual Practice—Body Prayer with Doctrine and Covenants 163

- **Group activity:** Invite the group to seek healing and compassion for relationships with God, self, and others in God's world through this prayer. Those uncomfortable with body prayer may prayerfully observe and support the group. Invite the group to journal and/or share oral expressions as desired after the prayer.

Praying with Doctrine and Covenants 163 (for Individuals or Groups)

Opening to God is at the heart of discernment. Gestures can help us open to the divine love and healing expressed in this revelation. Stand in a quiet place and center on your desire to open body and spirit to God.

- **First prayer posture:** Create a cup or bowl with your hands.
- **Meditation (one to two minutes) with first prayer phrase:** *God, the eternal Creator weeps...* Imagine your bowl catching God's tears. Be aware of God's tears for creation and the human family. Be aware of God's tears for you.
- **Closing gesture:** Bring your cupped hands over your head and empty the bowl of God's tears over yourself. Let God's tears anoint and bring you healing.
- **Second prayer posture:** Create a large circle with your arms as if hugging someone.
- **Meditation (one minute) with the second prayer phrase:** *God yearns to draw you close so that (your) wounds may be healed.* Imagine God embracing you and healing your wounds.
- **Closing gesture:** Bring hands over your heart; sense God drawing you closer.
- **Third prayer posture:** Create your own prayer movement or posture.
- **Meditation with the third prayer phrase:** *Be vulnerable to divine grace* as you take a simple body posture that expresses your desire to be vulnerable to God. Perhaps you want to raise your arms and face toward God, to kneel or bow. Hold this posture briefly. Let God move into heart, mind, and body with healing grace.
- **Closing gesture:** With palms together, bow and say, "thank you" and "amen."

Reflection Period 3

Spiritual Practice—Holding in the Light (Intercessory Prayer)

- **Group activity:** Invite the group to hold each other and the church in God's light with specific awareness of our need for God's guidance during our journey to the national conference. Place a candle (real or LED) in the center of your circle as a symbol of the illuminating light and love of the Spirit.

¹ Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2006), page 121.

Holding in the Light

This Quaker prayer invites us to place persons and concerns in the light of God's Spirit. Sit quietly, close your eyes, and breathe calmly. Be aware of God's presence. Allow an image to form in your mind of the person or concern you wish to pray for. See the person or concern being surrounded and held in God's light. Feel or sense this healing light even if you do not have an image of it. Open your heart to God's love for the person and continue to hold them in the light for five to 10 minutes.

Trust that words are not necessary because God already knows the need. Use this prayer to hold discernment questions or other healing needs in God's light.

Reflection Period 4

Spiritual Practice—Ashes and Oil (Healing Stories and Prayers)

- **Group activity:** Use this practice to end the final session of the group. Allow time for reflection on questions, spiritual practices, insights, and experiences from the group's journey. Facilitator will need to provide small bowls of ashes and oil (see below). Invite the group to enter the practice, trusting the Spirit to bring blessing and healing. End with a prayer of healing for the church and a blessing for the journey ahead.

Ashes and Oil: Prayers for Healing

What Is It?

- An exercise focused on the disciplines of spiritual friendship and intercessory prayer.
- A way of opening our lives to healing through scripture, symbols, compassionate listening, and sharing God's presence in prayer.
- A blessing of grace and healing when we are willing to offer God our ashes, tears, and heaviness.

Scripture Reflection

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted...To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion; to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

—Isaiah 61:1 NRSV, 61:3 IV

The Practice

1. Provide several small bowls of ashes and several bowls of lightly scented oil on a table. You may want to have a worship center or lighted candle on the table. (Note: Use non-scented oil or water if persons in the group have fragrance allergies.)
2. Read Isaiah 61:1–3, and offer brief reflections on God as the one who gives us beauty in exchange for our ashes, the oil of joy for our tears, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.
3. Sing 423 in *Hymns of the Saints*, if desired.
4. Invite each person to take a pinch of ashes and place it in his/her hand. Ask people to take a few moments to think of something for which they need healing—perhaps a hope, dream, or relationship that has disintegrated into ashes, a memory that needs forgiveness, a burden that needs lifting.
5. Ask people to share with a partner the situation or memory represented by their ashes. Each person should take two to three minutes to share what his or her ashes represent. The listening partner is asked to hear the story quietly and compassionately, offering only brief supportive comments as appropriate.
6. After each person tells his or her story, the partners discard their ashes into the bowls or a wastebasket. Each person dips one finger in a bowl of scented oil and places the drop of oil on the skin where his or her partner would like to be anointed (i.e., wrist, forehead, back of the hand).
7. The partners then offer brief prayers of healing and blessing for each other.
8. The facilitator invites people back to the circle and offers a brief prayer of thanks.

Note: This activity is not meant to serve as a replica of or replacement for the sacrament of administration carried out by elders. It should be done as an act of compassionate listening and the spiritual friendship that is at the heart of our relationship together as members of Christ's body.

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