PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT GUIDE
Discernment videos were filmed in Orange, California.

Produced by Community of Christ, 1001 W. Walnut St., Independence, MO 64050–3562
Created by Katie Harmon-McLaughlin, Spiritual Formation Ministries

Discernment video contributions: Donna Sperry, David Brock, Dustin Davis, Katie Harmon-McLaughlin, Brady Cackler, Bryce Veazey

© All rights reserved. Published in 2018.
Foreword

Jane M. Gardner, presiding evangelist

Decision-making can be daunting: Have we considered and researched all the options? Did we seek advice from those we trust? Are we really ready to make a change? Whether individually or as a group, we often limit decisions to making “pro” and “con” lists; the side that has the longest list is the winner!

But, where is God in the midst of this? How might God be included in our thinking, feeling, and deciding? “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11) This Eternal Parent continues to create and offers us the opportunity to be cocreators through purposeful, habitual discernment.

When discernment becomes a pattern for our daily living, we are transformed. This is always true of interactions with the Divine—we come away changed and focused on what matters. Our awareness and mindfulness lead us toward sacramental living, recognizing the holy in the midst of our ordinary lives. God is with us.

This resource provides a glimpse of what is possible. In it we are blessed by the wisdom of the World Church Spiritual Formation Team, under the leadership of Katie Harmon-McLaughlin, as presented in these four videos and the accompanying guide. As a team, we offer sincere gratitude for the generous donations made to GoFundMission that made these resources possible.

May you, your family, your congregation, and your community discern where God is at work in your world and joyfully join in this sacred activity for the blessing of all creation.
Introduction

Faithful discipleship includes faithfully seeking with other disciples a clearer understanding of God’s will. This process is ongoing so we can be open to new insights whenever they come. It is particularly vital when the church faces situations or questions that do not have easy or clear answers.

—Stephen M. Veazey, Ways of Discovering God’s Will

This resource and an accompanying four-part video series are offered to you as a guide for personal and communal discernment. The workbook is divided into three parts that correspond with the videos.

- Video 1: Foundations of Discernment Part 1
- Video 2: Foundations of Discernment Part 2
- Video 3: Engaging a Discernment Process Part 1
- Video 4: Engaging a Discernment Process Part 2

Discernment is much more than a process; it is a way of life. An individual or group could move through the steps of the discernment process without tasting the fruit of discernment if their hearts are not truly open to seeking God’s direction. However, for those individuals and communities together embracing a habit of discernment as the foundation for life, discernment may happen even without intentionally engaging a process.

It is vital for discerning communities to share an understanding of what discernment is and how we discern together. A discernment process can be thwarted when one or several members of the discerning body resist embracing a posture of humility, openness to God, and prayerfulness. To effectively engage discernment as a community, it is important that the group share equally the responsibility of participating in practices that deepen their relationships with God and one another.

Suggestions for engaging the text are offered throughout the workbook. We recommend that you find a balance of personal as well as communal time for discussion and practice in response to the videos and text.

Embracing a habit of discernment in our personal and communal lives isn’t about adding one more thing to do. Rather, it is an invitation to transform our patterns and priorities to be more aligned with the Life-Giving Spirit who calls us to a rhythm of rest, renewal, and response.

In Pursuing God’s Will Together, Ruth Haley Barton echoes this invitation to transformation when she expresses that the journey of discernment is “meant to provide hope that there is a way of doing life in leadership that is not so complicated and heavy—a way of making decisions that does not have to rely on our own brilliance and ability to think hard, a way of being involved in God’s work that ends up being more about God’s work than our own. Discerning and doing the will of God together is that way.” (Pursuing God’s Will Together, InterVarsity Press, 2012, p. 16)

May you discover renewal and fresh vision in the Spirit as you move into a rhythm of discernment.
Getting Started

• What is discernment?

Discernment is the practice of seeking and following the movement of the Spirit. In decision-making, we use a discernment process as we seek to be faithful to God’s vision for our lives and the world.

• What do I bring to discernment?

Nothing is too large or too small to bring to discernment. Personally, we may discern occupation, lifestyle changes, relationship and family issues, and daily habits. In community, we may discern questions about identity, invitations for the future, changes to the property, or opportunities for ministry. Even in regular patterns of administration, the Spirit is seeking to breathe through our programs and agendas to be the source of our life together.

• What does a discernment process look like?

  o Pray for spiritual freedom.
  o Articulate an accurate question for discernment.
  o Gather relevant data.
  o Take it all to prayer.
  o Come to a tentative decision.
  o Seek confirmation.

• How long does a discernment process last?

Discernment can happen in a day or in a year. Ideally, our circumstances allow for a discernment process to unfold in the time it most naturally needs to take. Sometimes, when we get to the end of the discernment process, we realize that we need more time and return to previous elements of the process. When a decision is pressing, we do the best we can in a short time frame. When articulating a question for discernment, it may be helpful to consider what an appropriate time frame may be while being willing to be flexible if more (or less) time is needed.
Part 1. Foundations of Discernment

Watch Video 1: Foundations of Discernment Part I. Use the reflections, questions, and practices in this section to go deeper personally and in community. Use the journaling pages at the back of this resource to record observations, reflections, or questions.
Why Discernment?

- Who is God calling us to become?
- Is the career I’m pursuing what I am really meant to do?
- How do we respond to this pressing issue or need?
- How do we stand for justice amid our political diversity?
- How can we use our resources faithfully?
- Do we replace the pews with chairs?
- What is God up to in our neighborhood?

Every day we are faced with choices. What should I wear today? How should I respond to this situation at work? What should we make for dinner? How should we spend our time? Though not insignificant, these choices are so small and habitual that we make them without much conscious thought. Every decision we make is forming the substance of this life we share and is a reflection of our values and beliefs. These decisions often have an effect beyond ourselves that we are not aware of.

We also, from time to time, are faced with much larger choices. Perhaps you are in the midst of an unwelcome disruption in your career that is confronting you with the need to make a change, or you are trying to decide where to go to college, or wondering if the person you are falling in love with is someone you want to commit to spending your life with. In corporate settings, these decisions may come when an issue of justice presses in and demands our attention, or our status quo is upset by changes in the community or surrounding culture. When what we had always done isn’t working anymore, we feel ourselves stagnating and begin to ask what’s next. Maybe it is something we thought would be a simple decision, like an alteration to our worship space, which has since erupted into communal tensions that are difficult to resolve.

As humans, we are always seeking meaning. Sometimes we move through life less awake, but beneath the surface there is a persistent longing pulsing with a vision of life as it could be. This longing is the Spirit within us, drawing us nearer, breaking through our routines and habits to invite us to deeper, fuller life. Perhaps you have experienced this divine discontent. It might be a faint feeling that something more is beckoning, or a life crisis that confronts you with the need to make a major decision. This can happen in our individual and communal lives.

Whether we come to discernment willingly or begrudgingly, we all end up here! We must make choices every day and throughout our lives. The questions for followers of Christ: Are we making choices faithfully in response to the Spirit’s movement and invitation? Are we seeking first the will of God or our own will? Are our choices moving us closer to where the Divine longing is calling us?

Consider the significant choices you have made thus far. Pay attention as you look back to how your life has been affected by the small and large choices you have made along the way.

Reflecting in Community:
- How have your choices shaped the course of your life?
- Where have you experienced God’s presence when looking back at times of decision?
What is Discernment?

In *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, Ruth Haley Barton explores the importance of discernment for communities of faith. If we are not consistently trying to understand God’s vision for us, she wonders, then what are we doing?

Our spiritual communities and congregations exist in response to God. Even though we may have our own ideas, agendas, or preferences, our ultimate purpose is to live as faithful expressions of God’s presence in the world. This is the essence of our understanding of mission. The blessing revealed in discernment is that when we are faithful to where the Spirit may be leading, there is always an inflow of greater love, energy, and desire. Barton defines our purpose in spiritual community as being, “committed to the habit of discernment—seeking to be attentive and alert to God’s activity in and among us so that we can respond faithfully.” (*Pursuing God’s Will Together*, InterVarsity Press, 2012, p. 16)

While discernment is critical for disciples to make decisions, the heart of discernment goes beyond any specific decision. A lifestyle that cultivates a habitually discerning heart will see the fruit of discernment ripen in specific decision-making moments. Discernment is less about something we do and more about who we become as people focused on God’s movement and direction. Our hearts become more and more in tune with the divine song singing through us. As we hear this holy melody, we become aware of where we are out of tune, where we experience dissonance, and where we discover harmony.

Discernment is the process of aligning our lives, both personally and in community, with the divine vision. It is the work of co-creation. As a prophetic people who embrace continuing revelation, we are especially attuned to the ways God is continually disclosing more “light and truth.” Distilled to its most basic expression, discernment is a deepening, vibrant relationship of attention and response to God who is always on the move.

Discernment, by nature, requires deep listening to the voice of the Spirit—the One we are seeking. We are often tempted to be self-sufficient, proposing our agendas to God, rather than recognizing that mission is God’s initiative. We hope to be attentive enough to the Spirit to be able to see and respond to God’s movement and invitation already happening around us. Seeking first God’s vision is not blind obedience, but eyes-wide-open searching for the One for whom our souls yearn, inviting expression in the details of daily living. We are not asked to suspend our “thinking minds” but to take them with us into prayer. The invitation is to be humble enough to realize that sometimes our plans are too small, our logic too limited, to be able to grasp the dream of God with and for us.

Discernment, by nature, requires deep listening to the voice of the Spirit—the One we are seeking.

There is nothing too small or too large to take to discernment. In fact, when urgency presses in and fear tightens within us, the work of discernment invites us to remember to whom we belong and in whom we live—reaching out toward the eternal source of love. Sometimes we feel there is no time or no hope. Sometimes we question the efficacy of prayer. Those may be the precise moments when the voice of love is trying to speak to us and return us to the rhythm of the One who is all time and all hope.

While we cannot engage discernment alone, no one can discern for us. Even in personal discernment, listening to sources of wisdom and considering the effect of our choices on others is a critical component. Discernment is always more about connection than isolation. When we seek to align our lives with the divine vision it is both about us and beyond us. We have the joy of belonging to God’s dream of shalom that is unfolding its expansive possibility through even seemingly insignificant moments and choices.
When we genuinely seek and respond to God’s vision, we can be assured that we will be led closer to the peaceable kingdom of God on Earth. Nothing we take to discernment, no matter how personal, is outside the scope of God’s deep dream for the whole world.

The Spirit of the One you follow is the spirit of love and peace. That Spirit seeks to abide in the hearts of those who would embrace its call and live its message. The path will not always be easy, the choices will not always be clear, but the cause is sure and the Spirit will bear witness to the truth, and those who live the truth will know the hope and the joy of discipleship in the community of Christ. —*Doctrine and Covenants Section 161:7*

**Reflecting in Community:**

1. Why is it important for disciples to engage in discernment?
2. How is discernment both personal and communal?
3. What does it look like in your life to cultivate a habitually discerning heart?
4. What is the difference between proposing an agenda for God and being open to God’s agenda?
Seeking Spiritual Freedom

We wear many lenses as we seek God’s direction for our lives. These lenses include cultural norms, religious traditions, political and ideological preferences, ethnic heritage, and socio-economic status. Consider for a few moments the various lenses you wear that inform how you see the world and interpret events.

I see this in my own life as my husband and I make decisions together. There are times when we realize we are acting out of assumptions from our individual family cultures in ways that bring both blessing and frustration as we create a new family culture together! As we watch our daughter growing into her own personality, we joke about which family culture she demonstrates through different facial expressions and behaviors.

Religious lenses can vary from congregation to congregation even in the same denomination. I have witnessed multiple “right” ways to prepare communion, for instance! The lenses that shape how we see the world have made us who we are, so we aren’t asked to discard them entirely. The practice of spiritual freedom invites us to honestly examine the ways our lenses sometimes restrict faithful response. We are invited to see beyond our own lenses to ways other people may view the world and to the ways God views the world.

In Doctrine and Covenants Section 163:9, we are reminded to “break free of the shackles of conventional culture that mainly promote self-serving interests.” Through the practice of spiritual freedom, we intentionally make space within to respond freely and faithfully, even when that response disrupts the status quo or challenges our own preferences and agendas.

Spiritual freedom is demonstrated in the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Over and over, he was offered seemingly good things that might satisfy hunger and ego but resisted each one as he continued to seek God’s call. Jesus in the wilderness models a posture of radical availability to God. We are not strangers to the ways temptations can come in subtle forms and offer seemingly good things. It takes practice to remember that not every convenient or satisfying option is the best one. The practice of spiritual freedom invites us to sift through our priorities and opinions and release our attachments to what isn’t most life-giving for ourselves, others, and creation.

Spiritual freedom is often referred to as “holy indifference.” The term can be confusing as indifference might sound like a lack of care. On the contrary, holy indifference is a stance of caring so deeply about God’s vision that one is willing to suspend one’s own ideas and preferences to discover where God’s vision may lead. Mark E. Thibodeaux explains why spiritual freedom, or holy indifference, is so critical to discernment, “If I set out to make a decision without indifference, then I’ll unconsciously be steering my decision toward the option that I want. Why discern at all if I’m not actually open to more than one possibility?” (p.147, God’s Voice Within)

Spiritual freedom is an active, alert, attentive posture of openness to the Spirit in every condition and circumstance. It is the anchoring practice that returns us over and over to our intention of openness to God’s vision.
Praying for Spiritual Freedom

Enter a time of silence. Take a few moments to breathe deeply and listen within.

Gently notice what you carry into this time of discernment.

What assumptions, agendas, tensions, or lenses cloud your availability to God’s direction in this moment or in this issue?

Are there other priorities, tasks, or motivations competing for your attention?

Gently and slowly set aside whatever feels “un-free” in you as you embrace a larger openness to God and one another. Spiritual freedom doesn’t happen all at once. Notice any small opening in you and commit to returning often to the intention of expanding your availability to God.

Discernment requires an inner disposition of freedom to want most what God wants. In both personal and communal discernment processes, most of us come with a set of preconceived notions about how things need to turn out. We are asked to adopt an attitude of “holy indifference” until the call of God becomes clear. This does not mean, of course, that we do not care or that it doesn’t matter. It means that we are willing to let go of our particular preferences and hoped-for outcomes while we prayerfully wait for God’s call to form more fully in our awareness. This is no easy task. We hold our own understanding in high esteem and it is hard to release it. Sometimes we simply pray for the desire to move into a more open attitude in the discernment process. It is not easy, but the work of reigning in our own preference and personal agenda is worth it. An inner disposition of freedom allows the Spirit to move in and surprise us with a new way we had never dreamed of before.

—Carolyn Brock & Donna Sperry, *Discernment: A New/Old Path*
Part II. FOUNDATIONS OF DISCERNMENT

The Practice of Paying Attention

Watch Video 2: Foundations of Discernment Part II. Use the reflections, questions, and practices in this section to go deeper personally and in community. Use the journaling pages at the back of this resource to record observations, reflections, or questions.
A Story of Paying Attention

I could feel the tension rising in me as I sat through our leadership team meeting. We were discussing an issue that was sparking major disagreement. As we circled through our arguments and perspectives, I started to feel a weariness within. I noticed myself feeling more distant from my companions in ministry who joined me around the table. Frustration settled in and I began to see others through the lens of our disagreement rather than our common desire to make a wise decision.

As I was driving home after the meeting, I began to reflect on my own comments and behaviors. Why was I feeling so irritated? As I listened into that inner reality, I began to recognize moments when my own insecurities were triggered or I interpreted someone challenging my opinion as an assault against my value as a minister and a leader. I realized that even though some were resisting this one idea, I had enlarged the idea in my mind to be representative of my whole vision of ministry. Though it was certainly revealing different understandings about a vision for our life together, the conversation was not actually a rejection of me. In humility, I revisited my love for the people I served with and the many ways they had demonstrated love for me.

Next, I noticed the weariness. I wondered why I felt so tired after the meeting. It was the kind of totally emptied-out exhaustion that made me want to lie on the couch and do nothing but stare mindlessly at the TV. I listened into the weariness and reflected on the quality of conversation in the meeting. We had been talking in circles and had come to an impasse. We were not listening to God or to one another, and we were forcing an issue the congregation was not yet open to receive. The word “forcing” caught my attention and carried weight in my heart. I felt that it held truth. I needed to listen more closely to where my own reactions were coming from, to the people I shared in ministry with, and to where the Spirit was actually leading.

The more I practice discernment, the more I realize that it is less about a structured process for making decisions and more about careful attention to my own inner realities, my relationships with others, and the movement of God in everything. Wilke and Norene Au write that “discernment entails fostering a contemplative attitude that helps us to spot the presence of God in the concrete events and experiences of ordinary life.” (The Discerning Heart, p. 19)

When we engage in discernment over a particular issue, we choose to allow ourselves to see where the Spirit is inviting our attention in every dimension of life. It is like changing our camera to a panoramic view. Suddenly, everything that was once out of the frame comes into perspective. In whatever situation we are in, whatever the state of our relationships or the state of our hearts, discernment compels us to ask, “Where is God here and now?”

This means listening into moments of joy as well as discomfort, trusting that in everything there is something we can discover about the divine invitation. In my example, it was through finally listening into my own (and others’) weariness and frustration that I gained valuable insight about where the Spirit was not leading and heeded the urgent call to shift direction. Had I allowed myself to feel justified in my frustration and left the feelings unexamined, I might never have opened to the Spirit’s life-giving presence guiding us in another way.
Tending Interior Movements

Culturally, many of us have been raised with some level of suspicion toward our emotional lives. When making decisions, we typically prefer reason to intuition. We have seen or heard examples of unhealthy expression of emotional reactions in our faith communities and society that cause us to be wary of depending too heavily on our emotional faculties as a source of information for decision-making.

Yet everyday our emotions are right beneath the surface of every action and encounter of our lives. Even if they are unexamined (especially if they are unexamined), they still form our responses. It may be a deep insecurity that leads to rigid perfectionism in the workplace or fear that prompts you to take a step away from the man holding a sign on the sidewalk. It might be joy that is the source of your best work or an unfathomable love that compels you to act in a courageous way. All of these emotions are guideposts of the Spirit’s activity in and around us.

Listening to our emotions is a way of discovering the deepest orientation of our hearts in God. This is an essential practice because discernment is all about an orientation of the heart toward God as the source of all we are and do. In the Christian tradition, these deeper orientations of the heart are called consolation and desolation.

More than a fleeting feeling, they reveal a pattern of resistance or response over time. Consolation is drawing nearer to God; an opening of the heart often expressed through a deep and abiding peace, joy, and love. On the other hand, desolation can be described as turning away from God; a closing of the heart often expressed through dryness in prayer, a feeling of distance or despair, and dullness or apathy.

Though the concepts sound easy enough to distinguish, there is subtle nuance that invites our deeper exploration. For example, the congregation that doesn’t want to change because “everything is working just fine” might be experiencing desolation if that attitude leads to closing off new possibilities in response to the Spirit. Maybe there is a weariness or lack of motivation that is expressed through a dull acceptance of the current reality that keeps them from living in a more life-giving way. An authentic spiritual life does not lead to stagnation. Desolation is not always revealed through despair, but sometimes through a pervasive apathy or resistance that turns the heart away from the divine invitation.

Consolation: drawing nearer to God; an opening of the heart often expressed through a deep and abiding peace, joy, and love.

Desolation: turning away from God; a closing of the heart often expressed through dryness in prayer, a feeling of distance or despair, and dullness or apathy.

Paying attention to these inner realities can illuminate the Spirit’s activity in a discerning person or community. Consider the story I shared of the tense leadership team meeting in light of this reflection from Wilke and Norene Au,

“Wakefulness in painful situations can provide valuable data for constructive change; it can increase our awareness of what we are feeling, what is causing the pain, what is not working, what is rubbing against the grain. Awareness of these things can be the beginning of a way out of dead ends and painful places because awareness leads to ‘response ability,’ that is, the ability to respond.” (The Discerning Heart, Paulist Press, 2006, p. 30)
Similarly, consolation may be revealed through a challenging situation. Perhaps the call of God will require sacrificial living or is disrupting current life structures in a painful way. This is often the case when people are exploring new ways of being in relationship with God that lead to a loss of familiar understandings. Even through the discomfort there may be a deeper longing that flows from a fountain of peace even in the midst of profound change. The longing for God grows so strong in the soul that the urge to follow outweights the potential uncertainty and discomfort of change. This is an example of a heart oriented toward the divine invitation.

An example of consolation can be found in the testimony shared by Stephen M. Veazey in his 2005 World Conference Sermon, Share the Peace of Jesus Christ:

“As I am becoming increasingly rooted and grounded in Christ, I am finding, at the center of my being, peace—abiding peace—that passes understanding. This peace is not a passive peace. It is a peace that frees me to relate and act in ways that are counter to many of the destructive attitudes and trends so common today. It is an all-encompassing peace that assures me that in life or death I belong to Christ. Therefore, I do not need to be afraid.”

Maybe there is invitation in our struggle. Maybe there is possibility for healing in our tension. Maybe there is a signal of where we are called to go when we notice our deep longings. Maybe energy in us is revealing the Spirit’s presence. Maybe a new way is waiting to open, but we must first let go of our own attachments, agendas, or insecurities that currently obstruct. What inner voices do you need to welcome to the table to faithfully engage in discernment? What is the orientation of your heart as you enter into this process of seeking God’s direction?

Reflecting in Community:

- Consider the questions above and spend time journaling reflections or sharing in community.
- When have you experienced consolation or desolation? How did you recognize that inner movement?
- How can tending our inner lives affect our ability to better understand ourselves, others, and God throughout the discernment process?
## Noticing Desolation and Consolation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Consolation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Desolation</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where do I/we notice an inner opening?</td>
<td>Where do I/we feel most closed off? Where do I/we sense an impasse or dead end?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When do I/we feel a spaciousness within?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What brings joy and delight?</td>
<td>What brings dread or despair?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What ignites my/our energy and passion?</td>
<td>Where do I/we sense lack of motivation or weariness?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When am I (are we) most willing to trust the movement of the Spirit?</td>
<td>When do I/we feel most stubbornly committed to my own agendas or preferences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where is there a natural flow of possibility that I/we can join?</td>
<td>When does this issue feel forced?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does the longing to be faithful outweigh the “natural fear of spiritual and relational transformation?”</td>
<td>When does the “natural fear of spiritual and relational transformation” restrict response?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where is love (of God, others, creation) most evident? When do I/we sense that we are being moved by love?</td>
<td>When is love (of God, others, creation) most obstructed or crowded by frustration, misunderstanding, or rigidity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do I/we sense the most abiding peace?</td>
<td>Where do I/we sense a dis-ease or unsettledness?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where is disrupting leading to transformation?</td>
<td>Where is disruption being avoided or ignored?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paying Attention to Others

We are called to practice spiritual freedom within ourselves and in our relationships. Especially when we have shared many years in community, there is often a temptation to believe that we already know what there is to know about one another. This includes the characteristics we most admire as well as the wounds or tensions we struggle to reconcile. Yet each of us can chart the movement of the Spirit in our lives. We can map places of growth, either through circumstances we pursued or through challenges we did not choose.

There is always “more” to each of us than what we share on the surface of our encounters with one another. Perhaps you have felt this way before—wanting to express something within you that felt hard to articulate to someone else. We all carry worlds within us, mostly unspoken, of hopes, disappointments, concerns, and passions. When we assume we already know all there is to know about a person before us, we close ourselves to this inner world—a sanctuary of Spirit in which endless sacred mystery abides.

**Becoming a discerning community is about seeking God in all things, including one another.** We each have different ways of relating to God and experiencing the world, which can bless us with rich diversity of perspective when we are called into discernment. It is not easy to navigate our differences and previous relational tensions. We must confess that we can become impatient and easily frustrated with one another, especially when discussing topics that are important to us. Cultivating a discerning community requires us to become deep listeners, practicing holy curiosity with each person.

**Cultivating Discerning Community**

- **Listen to Understand:** Sometimes when we listen, we are already forming our response or rebuttal and miss the essence of what a person is truly saying. Consider moments in your own life when you have felt truly heard compared to moments you felt that you were not heard or understood. What is the difference in the quality of the listener?

Discerning communities listen deeply, taking a posture of holy curiosity. This requires us to set aside our judgements and agendas to be fully present to the person who is speaking. What if, as we are listening, rather than forming our own immediate responses, we remained attentive by considering, “Where is the Spirit at work in this person’s life and what they are saying? What is God revealing through this person that is important for me to understand?”

- **Seek Clarification:** We can use the same vocabulary while intending radically different meanings! Words and phrases become loaded with assumed meaning that may or may not reflect the speaker’s intent. As we listen, we can seek clarification by asking open questions like “When you say the role of a pastor is to offer ministries of healing, what do you mean? What does that look like for you?” Or “I’m curious what you mean when you say that worship is for communing with God. What does communing with God mean to you?” We begin to unearth more of the sacred mystery of one another when we listen compassionately and curiously to understand more about the assumptions we carry and what we really mean.

- **Tend Inner Movements:** When listening to others in discerning community, we are called to pay attention to what is happening within
us that might be affecting our response. Is there a feeling of defensiveness, excitement, competition, resistance, agreement? Where are these coming from in you? While listening, acknowledge what comes up and gently set it aside, committing to return to it later in personal prayer so that you can be more fully available to the person who is speaking here and now, responding from a place of freedom and love.

• Take Time to Process: It’s important to take time to listen deeply to each voice without feeling the need to rush ahead to resolution or response. Different personalities respond in different ways. It’s common in community for some to feel natural sharing immediately while others take longer to process what is being said and how they want to form their own response. It is a mistake to think that the first idea is always the best idea! We want to honor the creativity that can come in a time of discernment, but we don’t want to squelch what may be slowly emerging in the heart of someone else in the group who tends to be quieter. (In Appendix B you can find tools for sharing deeply and creating spaciousness.)

Use a variety of ways to gather responses from the group, including taking time to pause and be in silence, as a way for everyone to respond at their natural pace. We often rely on brainstorming to gather data from one another, but this is not always an effective method of mining what is deepest among us that the Spirit is seeking to reveal. Sometimes it takes time to become comfortable with silence, but even brief pauses between responses can create enough space for us to listen more deeply and respond more authentically.

• Return to Spiritual Freedom: The prayer for Spiritual Freedom remains foundational throughout the process of discernment, and is especially important as we discern in community. I discover I am most unavailable to the Spirit when I’m discussing issues I care most deeply about! Suddenly my agendas pound at the door demanding to be voiced or my insecurities come haunting with their questions about if what I have to say really matters. The goal is not to achieve perfect freedom all the time, but to be consciously and consistently aware of the places in us that may be restricting the Spirit’s life-giving presence.

Practicing spiritual freedom in relationship often means suspending my judgement about a person’s previous behaviors. It asks us to be open to the Spirit’s power to soften hearts, including my own. Or it may mean taking responsibility for the times that I hoard conversation and don’t leave space for others because I’m too concerned with sharing my own opinion. It might mean releasing my assumptions about a person’s political identity or theological understanding so I can listen from a deeper place to truly understand. Sometimes spiritual freedom means claiming the courage to move forward even when one or more participants is restricting the faithful intentions of others to discern God’s will. Spiritual freedom in the community is a mutual practice of seeking first the will of God in everything we are doing. It is vital as discerning community to return frequently to this intent.

Reflecting in Community: What does it look like to create safe relational space as a discerning community?

If we do not feel safe to be vulnerable and open in community, it is very hard to engage authentically in a discernment process. Cultivating a discerning community takes time and intention. Starting with shared assumptions can be helpful. Review these suggested assumptions with those you will be engaging in discernment. Is there anything you would add for your discerning community?
Shared Assumptions in Communal Discernment

- As a spiritual community, we affirm that the Spirit is the source of our life together.
- Seeking God in all things includes seeking God in one another.
- The Spirit’s invitation can be discovered in surprising places.
- Every person is a sacred mystery of inestimable worth.
- A discerning community is enriched when individual members commit to consistent personal prayer and reflection.
- Disagreement can be faithful and life-giving when expressed in love.
- There are multiple ways of hearing other perspectives.
- What is shared in community is held with trust and confidentiality.
- Safety in community does not mean avoidance of what is uncomfortable.
- *Who we become* as we discern is as important as *what we decide.*
Creating Space for Deep Listening 
in Communities and Leadership Teams

- Between times of gathering with the community, commit to your own rhythm of spiritual practice that awakens you to God’s presence and invitation. Be open to words, images, and experiences throughout your day and in times of personal prayer that might spark an insight, open a possibility, or bring clarity to your question of discernment.

- Begin each time of gathering with prayerful awareness of the presence of God here and now through communal spiritual practice. Return to the original intention of becoming available to God through the practice of spiritual freedom and of seeking God’s will as the heart of the purpose of spiritual community. Invite the group to share how they have noticed God’s presence and activity throughout the week or in previous gatherings. (Other helpful spiritual practices include The Prayer of Examen, Welcoming Prayer, Centering Prayer, Breath Prayer—see Appendix C.)

- Incorporate intentional spaciousness into your regular agenda as a group or team. These can be simple moments of shared silence that become like anchors drawing your awareness to God’s presence even amid the ordinary business you must tend to. They do not have to be long or complicated. Instead of getting carried away by conversation and planning, take periodic brief pauses, perhaps between agenda items, to invite the community to breathe in silence for 30 seconds to a minute and be open to what the Spirit is doing in the community. You may ask: Where have you sensed God’s movement or invitation in this conversation? Where is the Spirit leading amid this conversation? You do not need to provide time for verbal response, but you can if the schedule allows. You can invite people to respond in a word or phrase to check in on the spiritual condition of the community before moving to the next topic. If something significant arises, you may decide to stay with it and dig deeper before moving forward.

- In moments of tension or disagreement, invite the community to slow down and pay attention to the presence of the Spirit. God is present in our midst, and maybe most especially, in moments of disagreement, frustration, or weariness. Take a few moments to be present to God either in the silence or with meditative music playing. Invite the community to reflect: What is the source of passion or resistance around this topic? Do I feel opened to God’s movement right now, or closed off? What is the Spirit’s invitation in this situation?

- When pausing to listen in silence, invite people to offer a few reflections on what they “heard” in the silence as they listened for the Spirit’s movement and invitation. Don’t be afraid to be taken off course! Sometimes an insight is sparked, or another way emerges just from a few moments of shared silence. Those few moments may transform the original discussion into something more life-giving.

- Consider designating a Spiritual Companion or Holy Listener who offers these sacred pauses throughout your time of meeting and provides a prayerful presence.
Watch Video 3: Engaging a Process of Discernment Part I. Use the reflections, questions, and practices in this section to go deeper personally and in community. You may use the journaling pages at the back of this resource to record observations, reflections, or questions.
# THE DISCERNMENT PROCESS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Articulate an accurate question for discernment.</td>
<td>Articulate a question that accurately describes what you are seeking through the discernment process. Through prayer and spiritual freedom, an even deeper question may emerge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather relevant data.</td>
<td>Gather data relevant to your discernment topic through research, prayer, and dialogue. Consider all the details and implications associated with the discernment issue. Pay attention to all the ways the Spirit is seeking to be revealed through the discernment process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take it all to prayer.</td>
<td>Hold everything you have discovered so far in prayer. Spend time walking in nature or in silent reflection, contemplating the question for discernment without rushing to resolution. Notice what naturally arises that feels significant. Return to core spiritual practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Come to a tentative decision.</td>
<td>After holding the relevant data intentionally and prayerfully, notice if it feels like a way forward is already beginning to emerge in you. Imagine possible outcomes, paying attention to movements of consolation and desolation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek confirmation.</td>
<td>Pray for confirmation of the tentative decision. Consult trusted friends, mentors, or the discerning community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take Action.</td>
<td>Commit to concretely enacting the decision that has been made. Trust that the process of discernment is ongoing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Engaging the Process

Begin with the Prayer for Spiritual Freedom

What does it look like to make space in you for the Spirit in this discernment process?

- Enter a time of silence. Take a few moments to breathe deeply and listen within.
- Gently notice what you carry into this time of discernment.
- What assumptions, agendas, tensions, or lenses may be clouding your availability to God’s direction in this moment or in this issue?
- Are there other priorities, tasks, or motivations competing for your attention? Gently and slowly set aside whatever feels “un-free” in you as you embrace a larger openness to God and one another. Spiritual freedom doesn’t happen all at once. Notice any small opening in you and commit to returning often to the intention of expanding your availability to God.

Articulate an accurate question for discernment

Articulate a question that accurately describes what you are seeking through the discernment process. Through prayer and spiritual freedom, an even deeper question may emerge.

- Write down your initial discernment question.
- Describe the issue you are bringing to discernment. Where do you most desire clarity or direction? Notice what assumptions may be revealed in the question you are asking. Bring this question into prayer, gently holding it with God. Notice how it feels as you prepare to enter a time of discernment.
- Spend time with your original question and see if anything else emerges. Is this question truly representative of what you are seeking individually or in community?
- Seek confirmation that this question is what you will carry forward in the process. Commit to being open if the question shifts as your discernment continues.

Crafting a Question for Discernment

- Is this question too general to be discerned effectively? Is there something more specific that may be helpful to bring into this process? (Or, is this question so specific that it limits possibilities in discernment?)
- Is this a leading question or an open question? (Does the question already
assume an outcome, or does it lead to greater possibility?)

- In discerning community, does this question most accurately describe what the group is really seeking from this time of discernment?
- As you live with this question, does it still feel true to what you are seeking in discernment? Is there anything that shifts as you move through the process?

**Framing Essential Questions**

*What does an essential question look like?*

*Here are some key characteristics:*

- is thought provoking
- invites creative thinking
- stimulates reflective conversation
- generates positive energy and forward movement
- connects with deep meaning and purpose
- helps surface underlying assumptions
- focuses attention on what matters most


**Exploring Essential Questions**

*Original Question:* How do we get people from the neighborhood to come to church?

*Essential Question:* How are we being called into relationship with our neighbors?

The first question reveals several assumptions that may unintentionally inhibit the discernment process. The first assumption is that the goal is church attendance, when really that is only one way of being in relationship with people from the neighborhood. It is only one expression of life together in the Spirit.

The second assumption is that we have to find a way to get our neighbors to come to us, obstructing the option of mutual encounter.

The first question also might unintentionally cloud the deeper desire for relationship with the other possible motivations such as anxiety about the future and fear over survival as a congregation. If the congregation is shrinking and feeling an urgency to grow, it’s important to bring that into the prayer for spiritual freedom. We say, “God, our deep desire is to continue the life of our congregation in the ways it has been most meaningful and formational. Yet we set even this desire aside as we try to be most faithful to your vision for us.”

The second question recognizes that there are multiple ways of being in relationship that can occur in the neighborhood and in the church.

*For more information on Essential Questions, see Appendix D.*

**Gather Relevant Data**
There are multiple ways of knowing and gathering data in discernment. After we have articulated an accurate question, we begin to sift through all the realities that may affect our decision. It’s a practice of putting everything on the table at once as we seek clarity and weigh what is most important.

Gathering data reminds us that the Spirit is indeed present in all things, even in the details that may be seemingly mundane! Spirit shows up in the way all things work together toward our deepest desire for God.

Several tools for gathering relevant data include the Ignatian Inventory, the Six Lenses for Discovering God’s Will, and Praying with Body, Mind, and Soul. As we begin to unearth all the factors that affect a decision, it is important to practice sacred restraint! We might be tempted to rush to resolution as we begin to discover more, but the invitation is to prayerfully hold all of it, and continue in the discernment process before a decision is made. This is why returning consistently to the prayer for spiritual freedom is so important. Sometimes what we discover affirms our original perspective, and at other times it may challenge it!

**Ignatian Inventory**

When choosing among options, the Ignatian Inventory can be a helpful tool. We have probably all had some level of familiarity with making a basic list of pros and cons. St. Ignatius of Loyola encourages this practice, with one meaningful addition. He suggests that it’s not just the quantity on either side of the list, but the quality, the weight of the items.

We may have a few items on a con list and many more items on a pro list, but when holding each item prayerfully, we notice that some carry more significance. Paying attention to the factors that contribute to each decision with our heads and our hearts can shed more light on where the Spirit is leading us.

If your question for discernment does not have clear options for pros and cons, simply listing all the factors you are aware of and then holding them prayerfully can be a meaningful way to gather more information. Hold each item on your list and prayerfully notice: What does it feel like within when I consider this item? How much does it weigh? How much space does it seem to occupy in me, or in the community?

---

**Ways of Discovering God’s Will**

President Stephen M. Veazey introduced a helpful tool for discernment called *Ways of Discovering God’s Will*. It includes the six lenses—scripture, reason and knowledge, personal and communal experience, tradition, continuing revelation, and common consent. In the center of the model is God, the eternal community. “Our journey to discover,” writes President Veazey, “a clearer sense of divine will begins by recognizing God is God, and we are not!” The lenses provide a “better sense of the Spirit’s witness about the purposes of God.”

The lenses can provide valuable data that is important for us to see and consider as part of our discernment process. *What does our best understanding of the scriptural witness say to us about this issue? In our own personal and communal experience, what has been most meaningful and transformational?*

Bring your discernment question into each lens as you seek more clarity and notice where the Spirit is inviting your attention. You might decide to do this as a community by setting up six tables for conversation where each table represents a lens. Or you might decide to journal responses to each lens and then bring it to the community for further reflection and shared experience. Another way of engaging the model is to extend the practice over 6 weeks of gathering together to explore the discernment question through each specific lens.

As we engage this practice, President Veazey reminds us,

“A key to effectively using the ‘lenses’ is to see them in relationship to each other... Therefore, the various ‘lenses’ are best understood as interdependent. ...If we focus on just one or two, we run the high risk of going on tangents or missing some vital dimension of God’s will. While we may prefer one or some of the lenses because of our particular personalities, backgrounds, or spiritual types, we are called to discipline our lives to engage all of them. In fact, it is important to consciously engage the lenses and spiritual practices that are more difficult for us to ensure that we do not miss part of the broad vista of God’s vision.”

**Praying with Body, Mind, and Soul**

We have explored several ways of gathering data from a variety of sources as we further engage the discernment process. Another helpful source is ourselves! As we sift through all the available information, we pay attention to what is happening in our bodies, minds, and souls. This is where we continually return to our awareness of movements of *consolation* (drawing nearer to God) and *desolation* (drawing further from God) as we interact with all the material of discernment.

Our whole being is sending messages all the time. We can choose to ignore them or take them into prayerful consideration. As you move through the discernment process, something may cause you to feel an “ache in your gut” or a tightening in your chest.

A discovery may also lead to a sense of ease, opening, and relaxing; maybe even an audible exhale. Perhaps a way forward seems to be emerging as a good idea, yet you feel an uncomfortable weight within as you consider the option.

When these bodily sensations occur, it’s important to take note! *Why am I feeling this way? Is there some deeper resistance or longing that I need to tend as part of this process?*

The God in all things speaks through all means to lovingly, patiently guide us into deeper relationship and fuller life. Gather data by paying attention with your whole being:

**Body:** How am I feeling in my body in response to this discernment issue?

**Mind:** What am I currently thinking about this discernment issue? (Notice where your thoughts seem to wander, get stuck, or form patterns.)

**Soul:** What is moving deep within as I hold this discernment issue? (Where do
I notice movements of consolation or desolation?

**Questions for Gathering Relevant Data**

1) Who are the people and systems who will be affected by the outcome of this decision?
2) What are the practical implications of what may be discerned?
3) What factors need to be considered for whatever is discerned to become a reality? (Finances, administration, physical location, relationships, systems, etc.)
4) Where is the Spirit most at work in the details? When you imagine living out possible outcomes and doing the work associated with those outcomes, where do you sense most strongly energy and life in the Spirit?

---

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Take it all to prayer**

After the relevant data has been gathered, the invitation is to take it all to prayer. Spend time holding what you have discovered without feeling the pressure of rushing to a decision. Simply rest in God’s presence, seeking the movement of the Spirit in the process so far.

This is another opportunity to return to the prayer for spiritual freedom or to engage other spiritual practices such as the Prayer of Examen, Centering Prayer, or walking in nature. (You can find spiritual practices in Appendix C.) We become easily tempted to fall back on previous modes of decision-making once all the information is on the table before us. This is the time in the process when we remember again that God is the source of our life together and we return to that intention of becoming more available to God in all dimensions of life.

**Come to a Tentative Decision**

After holding the relevant data intentionally and prayerfully, notice if it feels like a way forward is beginning to emerge in you. Sometimes the best choice becomes gradually apparent. Other times clarity is still obscured and more time is needed to prayerfully sift through the realities that encompass the discernment issue. Especially when the process still feels clouded, returning to the prayer for spiritual freedom can be a helpful way of tending what needs to be released for the direction of the Spirit to come into view.

Engaging the process of discernment is not about proving our worthiness so that we will get an answer from God. God is continually revealing. Discernment attunes us to that generous, out-poured revelation of God in every dimension of life. As we move through the process, we slowly begin to discover the way that is already being made in us.

When you are ready to come to a tentative decision, a helpful practice is to imagine the possible outcome. Consider that you have already decided and are now living in the reality of that decision. Notice how it feels: Is there energy or dread? Is there a sense of relief or something unresolved? In discerning community, it is especially important to note how the community is feeling in response to this tentative choice. Is there a growing consensus or a deepening division? Is the community beginning to feel settled or does the decision feel forced?
This is a time for bringing the decision into community with others. If you are discerning in your life, take it to trusted friends and mentors. If you are a discerning community, gather responses from the other members to test how the decision feels at this point.

If it feels appropriate, this might be the time to move forward in the process. If not, the invitation is to return to earlier practices and continue the work of discernment until it feels like a way is opening. Sometimes time restrictions do not allow for further discernment. If that is the case, choose to set this discernment issue aside. Don’t make any decision right now, committing to return to it later. Or there might be a need to make a decision with the best information available and the acknowledgment that discernment is an ongoing process.

**Seek Confirmation**

The ultimate goal in discernment is faithfulness to where the Spirit is leading. Seeking confirmation invites us to bring the decision that is emerging into another time of prayer.

Many of us ask how to know when we have made a faithful decision. The good news is that when we genuinely enter into relationship with God through the discernment process there is no way we can fail! What we decide is not as important as who we become in God along the way. As we deepen our life in God, we deepen our capacity for discernment in every area of life. These lists of characteristics of confirmation and disconfirmation can begin to test your decision (see chart).

Another way of seeking confirmation is to look for the fruits of the Spirit in yourself and in the community. The fruits of the Spirit are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23) Do these fruits seem to be naturally emerging in times of prayer, in relationships, and in the community as a whole? The quality of our inner lives and relationships can speak profoundly to a sense of confirmation or disconfirmation of our decision.

**Take Action**

We rarely have complete certainty as we move forward into an unknown future. Acting on a decision requires courage and trust. Action is the next movement in the flow of faithful response. Even if we have only enough light to illuminate the next step, we trust that is enough for now. Cultivating a habit of discernment creates a foundation for returning often to our intention of faithfulness to the Spirit’s movement and invitation. The discernment process never ends. “With new answers,” reminds David Brock, “come new questions!”

After receiving a sense of confirmation, we move forward with what has been discerned. At times this forward movement is accompanied by joyful anticipation and the energy of new life. At other times enacting our decision might include at least a little trepidation. The Spirit can lead to surprising new places, to broader horizons of what we thought possible or imagined we were capable of.
The summer after I graduated from college, I discerned that I would spend two months in India with World Service Corps. Leading up to the trip, I was excited and nervous, but as I sat on the plane headed over the Atlantic, I experienced terror and awe. At first the voice of fear crept in with its insecurities, “Why did you think you could do this?” But then that deeper-down peace arrived with an affirmation of my journey, whispering into my soul, “You never imagined you could be this brave.” I was in awe of where the Spirit was leading me even though I had no idea what would come next.

Brave women and men throughout history have discerned courageous response to some of the world’s most challenging and perplexing issues. They sourced their action in the Spirit, which sustained when discomfort, confrontation, and even the threat of death would have them choose otherwise. Even if our hearts pulse with fear in the face of the unknown, we need not turn away. We are invited to turn again, and always, to the Spirit, who is present in all things, even in the places we never dreamed we could be.

Discernment will not always lead us to the most comfortable outcome, but it will lead us to the place where our deepest desires intersect with God’s dream for us and the whole of creation. It will lead to the place of abundant life. It will lead into growth and transformation. It will lead to new territory, to new ways of seeing, and to more questions that invite us perpetually to seek the Spirit and dare to follow. Wherever we go, whatever we decide, God is already there—moving, acting, redeeming, creating, and inviting us to join.

Reflecting in Community:
- How does the whole discernment process invite us into faithful response to the leading of the Spirit?
- How might this approach to decision-making differ from what you have experienced? (Or does this process affirm practices you’ve already been living?)
- How do you imagine engaging a process for discernment in your life or community?

Watch Video 4: Engaging a Process of Discernment Part II. Use the reflections, questions, and practices in this section to go deeper personally and in community. You may use the journaling pages at the back of this resource to record observations, reflections, or questions.
# Noticing Confirmation and Disconfirmation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signs of Confirmation</th>
<th>Signs of Disconfirmation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Deep down there is peace, even if nervousness or uncertainty linger.</td>
<td>• Deep down there is fear, anxiety, or unsettledness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I feel confident following the Spirit even if I don’t have all the answers right away.</td>
<td>• I’m confused and irritated, like I’m stumbling in the dark.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I am aware of God’s presence with me.</td>
<td>• God feels distant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I am motivated to action and movement rooted in love and hope.</td>
<td>• I feel stuck, immobile, unmotivated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It feels like the pieces are coming together. I am moved toward reconciliation and unity in relationships and other aspects of my life.</td>
<td>• It is tempting to sever connections and become distant in relationships. I am holding onto feelings of hurt, frustration, and bitterness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I feel inspired to naturally spend more time in relationships, invitations, and behaviors that are life-giving and stretch me into growth. Prayer and time with loved ones (including sacred community) is a high priority.</td>
<td>• Prayer feels unnatural or forced. I find myself withdrawing from community and significant relationships. I am neglecting what will be best for me at this point in my life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When I ponder where this decision will lead, I recognize the fruits of the Spirit and see positive outcomes.</td>
<td>• When I ponder where this decision will lead, the outcomes don’t seem to be good for me or others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It feels like I am in the midst of a divine movement that has already been happening. This is the most natural evolution or unfolding of the next part of the journey.</td>
<td>• It feels like I am wandering away from the source of what has been most sustaining. I wonder if I am trying to force something that is unnatural and disconnected from the flow of my life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Others I trust are supportive of this decision and I look forward to sharing it with those I love.</td>
<td>• I feel guarded. I know there will be disapproval from those I love and trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Spiritual maturity is developing in me. I feel free to act boldly, but wisely and with a sense of the right timing.</td>
<td>• I feel reckless and rushed. I get caught up in the frantic need to move forward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The way forward is emerging in me as the clearest option. Other possibilities gradually fade from view.</td>
<td>• Other options keep lingering and nagging. I don’t feel clarity and still feel torn between multiple possibilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How do I implement a discernment process in my community?

Designate a time frame

Determine together what a wise time frame for making your decision might be. It’s important to make space for the process to naturally unfold. It is also important to notice when it is time to take action. The specificity of your question also affects the time frame. For example, if a community is discerning changes to their facilities that require more immediate attention, they might decide to meet once a week for 6 weeks, and commit to personal practice between meetings, to engage the process as faithfully as possible within the time frame they have.

If a community is discerning a broader question that is less urgent, such as how to engage in relationship with the neighborhood, they can decide to be in discernment for 6-12 months, meeting several times a month and committing to personal practice between meetings.

It is wise to pull out the calendar at the beginning of the process and put together a schedule that the whole group can commit to in advance. (It is likely that not every person will be able to attend every gathering, but planning ahead can make participation more accessible and will give the process a structure the community can begin to relax into.) Include the invitation for people to schedule their own times of personal prayer related to this discernment issue.

Commit to Consistent Gatherings Focused on the Discernment Issue

Commit with the whole group or a team representing the group to gather consistently to focus on the issue for discernment. See a sample discernment meeting below. If gathering as a team representing the larger community, discuss appropriate ways and times to integrate the larger community into the process. This can be a time to test ideas, to share in prayer, or simply to listen for where the Spirit is at work in the members of the community as the discernment process unfolds.

Integrate the Discernment Process into Other Areas of Life and Ministry

Spiritual communities can integrate discernment into their rhythms of gathering by inviting the community to pay attention to where the Spirit has been at work by sharing experiences and engaging in communal spiritual practices such as the Prayer of Examen and the Prayer for Spiritual Freedom. This could take place at the beginning of a worship or class experience, within a leadership team meeting, or as a devotional prior to regular activities and events.
Sample Discernment Meeting
90 minutes—7:00-8:30

7:00 Begin with the Prayer for Spiritual Freedom (spend 5-10 minutes in silence as members engage the various movements of the prayer).

7:10 Invite responses from the group. What does it look like for us to be more available to God as we discern this issue? Is there anything we need to release? Are there assumptions we need to examine?

7:20 Where have you been aware of the Spirit at work since we last gathered, especially in relation to our question for discernment? (Share as a group.)

7:30 Together, engage the step of the discernment process you are in now. (You can use the tools and practices throughout this resource as a way to engage in conversation, enter deeper prayer, and gather relevant data.)

8:20 Begin to draw the meeting to a close with an invitation to spend a1 minute in silence, noticing where the Spirit has been moving within and among the group.

8:21 Share responses of how the discernment issue is feeling at this point and what may be needed for greater clarity in the days ahead. Is there anything that is beginning to be revealed? Reaffirm the commitment to integrate this discernment question into personal prayer.

8:28 Close the meeting with prayer.
Appendix A
Discernment in Scripture

Spend time with these scriptures as examples of discernment. What other scriptures or stories shed light on the meaning of discernment? Choose a scripture (or return to all of them over time) to dwell in more deeply through the spiritual practice, Lectio Divina (see Appendix C).

Psalm 23
1 Kings 3:5-15
Jeremiah 6:16
Proverbs 17:24
Luke 4:1-12
Romans 12:2
James 1:5
Isaiah 43:19
Matthew 7:7-8
Mark 10:46-52
John 10:1-18
2 Corinthians 4:16-18
Doctrine and Covenants Section 161:7
Doctrine and Covenants Section 162:1-2
Doctrine and Covenants Section 163:1
Doctrine and Covenants Section 163:11b
Doctrine and Covenants Section 164:9a-f
Appendix B
Ways of Listening Deeply

Sharing Vision

Each member of the community receives a pen and paper. The facilitator asks a question to focus the group on the issue at hand, inviting the community to write or draw their responses.

Sample questions

- What is your best understanding of faithful response to this issue?
- Where do you sense the Spirit at work in this decision?
- What matters most to you that you want the community to understand as we listen together?

Process

- Begin with silence for the group to listen within as they ponder the question. It may be helpful to play quiet instrumental music in the background.
- After a period of silence, the facilitator invites the group to draw or write their response to the question.
- After each person has finished, collect the responses and mix them up in a bowl before passing them out anonymously.
- Each participant is asked to articulate the writing or drawing that they received to the best of their ability, keeping in mind that they may need to express an idea that is different from their own.
- After everyone has shared, the group is invited to respond.
  - What is this practice like for you? How did it feel to have someone else articulate your point of view? How did it feel to give faithful expression to someone else’s point of view?
  - What did you hear? What surprised you? What challenged you?
  - Where were you aware of the movement of the Spirit in the community as you listened deeply?
  - Was there anything revealed for you that sheds light on our discernment process?

- Close with prayer, offering gratitude for the ways the Spirit is revealed through one another.

Holy Listening

A facilitator leads the experience described below using a chime, singing bowl, or bell to indicate movement to the next person and times of silent prayer. The facilitator will pose a question for the group to consider. This question could be directly related to a specific discernment issue, or as an open question to nurture growth as spiritual community.

Sample Questions

- What is your best understanding of faithful response to this issue?
- Where do you sense the Spirit at work in this decision?
- What matters most to you that you want the community to understand as we listen together?
- How is it with your soul?
- How would you describe your spiritual journey at this point?
• When have you experienced transformation in the Spirit?
• Where have you been most aware of the presence of God in the past week?

Invitation to Practice

• This is a practice in being fully present with one another and listening deeply.
• This is a practice in sharing vulnerably.
• Our time together is a form of prayer.
• As we listen, we sharpen our attention to the way God speaks to us through one another in shared and differing experiences.
• We resist the urge to fix, advise, or interrupt.
• We approach one another with reverence, respect, curiosity, and blessing.

Process

• Moment of silent prayer for the person about to share.

• Designated person has time to share. Chime will indicate that the time has started and ended. They do not have to share the whole time, but the space is held open to them if something else emerges in the silence.
• Moment of silent prayer for the person who has just shared.

After everyone has shared, invite the groups to reflect in the larger community:

• What was this process like for you? How did it feel to have the time and space to be truly heard? How was it to listen deeply to others without needing to respond?
• Where were you aware of the movement of the Spirit in the community as you listened deeply?
• Was there anything revealed for you that sheds light on our discernment process?
Appendix C
Spiritual Practices

Praying For Spiritual Freedom

Enter a time of silence. Take a few moments to breathe deeply and listen within.

Gently notice what you carry into this time of discernment.

What assumptions, agendas, tensions, or lenses may be clouding your availability to God’s direction in this moment or in this issue?

Are there other priorities, tasks, or motivations competing for your attention?

Gently and slowly set aside whatever feels “un-free” in you as you embrace a larger openness to God and one another. Spiritual freedom doesn’t happen all at once. Notice any small opening in you and commit to returning often to the intention of expanding your availability to God.

Breathing In the Spaces

This practice helps us center ourselves and be more aware of people and God’s presence by stopping and consciously taking a breath as we enter various spaces during the day. When you step or move into different spaces, consciously place yourself in the new setting with a desire to be alert to God’s presence. Overtime simply taking a deliberate breath will remind you that you are in God’s presence, and that you want to be alert to God’s purposes in that setting.

In your home, as you enter shared space, pause to take a breath and be aware of how precious this space and the people are (or have been) to you and the gratitude you have for them.

When entering the different spaces in your day (workplace, a colleague’s office, a restaurant or other business, school or places where people meet) pause and take a deliberate breath. When returning home, pause to take a breath. As you take a deep breath, breathe in the goodness of the profound presence and purposes of God in each place you find yourself. Allow yourself to be drawn to people who may be blessed in simple ways by you being aware of them as persons of worth. — missionalleaders.org

Walking 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. Allow twenty minutes or longer for walking. 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, 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? —Yearning for God

Centering Prayer

Set a timer for 20 minutes. (If that feels like too much at first, choose a time that will be comfortable for you as a starting place, committing to expanding that time in future prayer.)
Allow the rhythm of your breath to draw you deeper and deeper into silence. As you breathe, claim one sacred word (Christ, peace, grace, trust) emerging in you as an anchor to return you to the intention of your prayer when your thoughts begin to wander.

Gently release the thoughts and images that come, making space for presence to the One who is with you here and now. Release, return, “be vulnerable to divine grace.” (Doctrine and Covenants Section 163:10b)

**Breath Prayer**

Begin by observing your breath. Be a gentle observer of your breath as it enters and exits your body, noticing the rise and fall of your chest, the sound of each exhale and inhale.

As you continue to breathe, allow a sacred phrase to emerge in you that you repeat silently with each breath in and out.

This sacred phrase could take several forms:

Breathe In: A word or phrase that describes what you yearn to receive.

Breathe Out: A word of phrase that describes what you yearn to release.

*Ex. Breathe in peace. Breathe out fear.*

Breathe In: A name for God

Breathe Out: A longing for God


Or you may use a short phrase from scripture, prayer, or song that you repeat prayerfully with each inhale and exhale.

*Ex. Breathe In: “Lord Jesus Christ...” Breathe Out: “... Have Mercy.”*

*Ex. Breathe In: “Search Me, O God...”*

**Breathe Out: “... And know my heart.” (Psalm 139)**

Spend several minutes breathing with your sacred phrase until you are no longer concentrating on the words, but allowing them to deepen a silent receptivity to God’s presence within you. When you feel ready, let the words go and continue breathing as you dwell in the presence of the Spirit with you here and now.

**Prayer of Examen**

The Prayer of Examen invites us into sacred review by searching our memories and seeking God’s presence in all things. Through this prayer, we become aware of the Spirit’s presence and invitation in the entirety of our human experience.

- Pray for Light: Begin by taking a few deep breaths and imagine yourself in God’s gaze of unconditional love and grace. Pray for the light to illuminate the spaces in your life where God is seeking to be revealed.

- Offer Gratitude: For what are you grateful this day? Where have you been most aware of the presence of God?

- Review Memories: Allow memories to surface within you (of the past day, week, or month) regardless of whether they seem mundane or significant. Pay attention to how you felt as you engaged the different aspects of your day, spent time in relationships, and carried out responsibilities.

- Confess and Reconcile: Gently and honestly notice the places in your memories where you felt most disconnected from God’s presence. What patterns of thought or behavior restricted your response to God’s call? What situations or relationships are in
need of reconciliation? The aim of this movement of the prayer is not to induce shame, but to stoke our awareness of thoughts and actions contrary to our deep desire for connection with God, others, and creation.

- Discern the Future: Take a few moments to consider your future. Anticipate the circumstances and decisions that lie ahead. Imagine what life would look like as you become more available to God’s invitation in every moment, in all things. Close your time of prayer by offering your life, and your future, to God.

Circles of Blessing

Adapted from Buddhist practice, this prayer invites us to prayer through the various “circles” of relationship in our lives, opening our hearts to others and being more aware of how our lives can be a blessing in the world. For each circle, spend time in silence repeating this phrase as you visualize the person or group for whom you are praying:

May they be blessed with loving kindness,
May they be blessed with health
May they be blessed with true happiness,
May they be blessed with peace

- Circle 1: Yourself
- Circle 2: Someone who is beloved to you (family member, romantic partner)
- Circle 3: A close or dear friend
- Circle 4: An acquaintance (someone you encounter regularly but don’t know well)
- Circle 5: An enemy, or someone you struggle with, perhaps someone who has hurt you
- Circle 6: Return to yourself

Welcoming Prayer

Welcoming Prayer is a practice of paying attention within as a way to discover more about where God is active and leading in our lives.

Listen within...

Pay attention to what you are feeling right now. It may take a few moments of breathing into the silence to notice what emotions are taking up the most interior space in you.

Without judgment, simply notice them as they rise to the surface within.

Welcome what you find...

Write down or speak silently within, “Welcome ______” to each emotion.

(Ex. Welcome, anxiety. Welcome, longing. Welcome, weariness.)

Choose to engage what is most significant in you rather trying to name everything within at once.

Release whatever restricts open and free presence...

Once you have spent time welcoming each inner voice, notice what you may be invited to gently release.

Ex.
I let go of my fear...
I let go of my need to control this situation...
I let go of the need for approval...

If something lingers or it feels artificial to let something go right now, don’t force it. Gently accept whatever is within and commit to listening into that space to continue to discover what
wisdom or insight it may have to bring in the days ahead.

**Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)**

Lectio Divina is a form of praying with scripture. Read the scripture slowly and repetitively as you make your way through each movement of the prayer.

- **Lectio (Reading):** Dwell in the words of the text. Notice where you sense movement within as you are listening/reading.

- **Meditatio (Meditation):** Savor a word, phrase, or image that captures your attention.

- **Oratio (Prayer):** Enter into sacred conversation with God: What is God’s invitation to you in this text?

- **Contemplatio (Contemplation):** How is God’s presence revealed through this text here and now? Simply rest in God’s presence.

**Journaling**

Writing down our experiences can help us preserve them to notice future patterns and invitations. It can also help us discover more of God’s presence and invitation in the here and now. As you write, don’t worry too much about proper grammar or making it sound nice. Be open to what flows forth and seeks expression in you.

Journal prompts:

- I feel most alive and awake when...
- I was most aware of God’s presence when...
- God’s invitation to me is...
- When I listen within, this is what I hear...
- What feels most significant in me right now is...
- The theme or pattern in my life right now is...
- I am most grateful for...

**Discover more practices!**

- [https://www.cofchrist.org/spiritualformation/practices.asp](https://www.cofchrist.org/spiritualformation/practices.asp)
- [http://www.missionalleaders.org/all-practices](http://www.missionalleaders.org/all-practices)
Appendix D

Grasping for Answers or Living with Essential Questions
By Shandra Newcom and Ron Harmon

It is my job to ask questions. Not to get answers but to spend time with someone in the question itself. I know I’m close to an ah-ha moment when the person I ask the question to pauses and, deep in thought, moves away from feeling like they have to answer the question and moves into the question itself.

Questions invite. Essential questions invite us into new ways of being and seeing.

What is an essential question? An essential question is one that isn’t necessarily answerable. It is a question that draws you out of the known, places you squarely in the wonderment and rests there. It gets to the heart of the matter. It leads people to inquiry and sends them on a journey. Discerning, asking, and pursuing essential questions keeps us on the prophetic edge—God’s unfolding future. Jesus asked essential questions all the time: “Who do they say that I am?” “Why do you doubt?” “Will you give me a drink?” “Do you love me?”

Asking questions is the key to growth and change. Discernment is the place to begin. It is important to get quiet to listen for what questions may emerge. Individuals on their faith journey will encounter a variety of questions throughout their journey. These questions will become traveling companions. When asking one’s self essential questions, the value is not in solving the problem. Nor is it in grasping for answers. The value is in the listening, the asking, the space of inquiry.

Communities ask essential questions, too. As they seek to meet God in the neighborhood, serve as a place of invitation and welcome and risk something new, they, too, get quiet and listen for the prophetic/essential questions that emerge that will draw them into being Christ’s hands and feet in the world.

This is where culture change happens, and that is critical to missional living.

There is something in the Western culture that values getting to the right answer. Either a person has the answer, or they don’t. And if they don’t, they need to figure the answer out—the sooner the better. We are impatient. We feel uncomfortable in the in between space. The church used to act as if it had the answers too. Christian denominations have largely differentiated themselves not on the questions they are pursuing but the rightness of their answers to questions they deem to be significant. In fact, it seemed that asking questions—especially about God in the world—hasn’t been appropriate or allowed.

But there has been a recent culture shift that is finding its way into our Christian communities. Questions are being asked and these are questions without easy answers. These aren’t questions that will make some right and some wrong, these are both/and questions; these are questions about what is deepest in our hearts: Our love of God and one another and how we live lives of service to both. These are questions we ask as we seek to discern and pursue mission together.

Discerning and asking essential questions helps ground individuals and communities in possibility. It requires discipline to “live with” questions for a while and allow our
conversations as well as the questions to mature and evolve. In a culture that often values quick and decisive decision-making, we are challenged to frame questions that will shape our journey together over the long-term and lead us into new ways of being and acting as disciples.

Answers close down inquiry but asking deep questions unlocks doors of knowledge and experience. As much as it may be uncomfortable to find yourself in a place where you are not looking for answers, it is important to ask questions that stir up emotion and lead you to something new. It is worth it to become comfortable about asking questions. This happens best in communities that are willing to ask them together. We weave a cloth of faith and love that includes threads of question and discernment. We come together to have conversations that include questions. We learn to value the space that is created by asking.

**Asking questions keeps us on the prophetic edge:**

Discernment is a primary practice when asking essential questions. It taps us into God’s invitation for us to listen and discover the questions themselves. It turns off the outside noise and chatter so that we can hear clearly the questions we will then explore.

> “Discernment is an intentional process of opening to God’s will, utilizing reason, faith, and prayerful reflection, so that our choices are aligned more closely with God’s purposes. Discernment flourishes in a context of regular spiritual practices, a suspension of personal agendas, and a desire to join in God’s creative action in the world.” —Donna Sperry and Carolyn Brock

**Often, turning to scripture will help us identify questions as well.**

> “Simple, direct questions that cut to the heart of the matter are part of the spiritual tradition. Jesus had a way of sweeping distractions out of the way with a trenchant question. To the blind beggar Bartimaeus he asked: ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ To the disciples of John the Baptist, as they crept along behind him, attracted yet cautious: ‘What do you seek?’ To the disciples, despairing of having enough to feed the multitude: ‘How many loaves have you? Go and see?’” —Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening*

From our time with discernment, we may identify questions that take us to the heart of who we are called to be as faithful communities. We will find a place to begin conversation. We will discover where we are meant to go. Asking the questions of ourselves we will find a pursuit—not of answers—but of connection. An essential question, well asked, will lead us always to God at work in the world and our place in the rhythm of God’s love.

**Risk Living the Questions, Not the Answers**

**Questions for Reflection:**

There are two overarching questions to explore as Christian community that will guide missional expression and service:

> What is God doing in, among, and ahead of us? How then shall we live as disciples and communities of Christ’s invitation, love, and peace?

The first essential question is a question of awakening. We wake up to the movement of God in the world. When we ask: What is God doing, it invites us to look beyond our limited human understanding and see the world anew. How can we identify God in our communities? How can we meet God there and serve and work in new and meaningful ways?
The second essential question is a question of risking and blessing. We discover together new ways we can risk transformation through acts of learning, discipleship, community building and serving others. We partner with God and with one another. We live Christ’s mission boldly and with joy.

For individuals, taking time in discernment and personal reflection on these two questions can support personal action and connection to divine movement in the world.

For communities, talking and listening together about these two questions can support new initiatives taking people – together – into a new way of living and being “church.”
Appendix E

Resources for Further Study

The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making by Elizabeth Liebert

The Soul of Discernment: A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions by Elizabeth Liebert

God’s Voice Within: The Ignatian Way of Discovering God’s Will by Mark E. Thibodeaux

The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path by Wilkie and Norene Au

The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola by Dean Brackley

Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups by Ruth Haley Barton

Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God’s Will for Your Life by Debra K. Farrinton

Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality by Margaret Silf