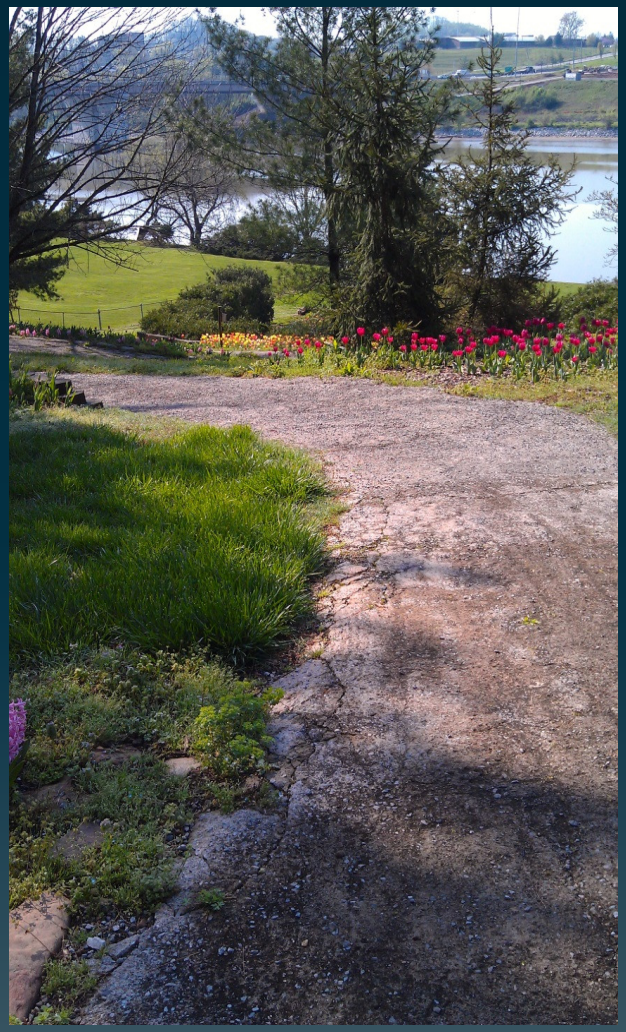
A DISCERNMENT TRAVELOGUE



Practices for small groups, large groups, church committees, prayer circles, and individuals

a resource developed by the Ministerial Excellence, Support & Authorization (MESA) Ministry Team and the Habakkuk Group

THE LANDSCAPE:

DISCERNMENT AS A FUNDAMENTAL DISPOSITION

Discernment is how we live our lives, thoughtfully and faithfully. It is the fundamental disposition of aligning ourselves with that sense and experience of God's Spirit moving in and empowering our lives.

Discernment is also the Christian practice of seeking God's call in the midst of the decisions that mark one's life.

Communal practice of discernment places group decisions within the context of God's activity. It trusts that resolution based on something larger than self-interest or partisanship is possible...the goal of God's activity being the New Creation.

The practice of discernment makes intentional a process of reflection on and participation with God's Spirit as the fundamental context in which we live and make choices.

It's important to realize: "Discernment doesn't just happen. It must be intentionally nurtured within the culture of the team. A team that is grounded in God's spirit, and open to authentic discernment, will cultivate its presence, its process, and its practices."

- Susan Beaumont

RULES OF THE ROAD:

1. Be fully present, extending and presuming welcome to/from others.

2. Listen generously and suspend judgment about another's story. Hold stories with care and respect.

3. Author your own story and share your own gifts.

4. Wonder. Welcome discomfort. Love the questions.

5. Be mindful and respectful of time.

6. Practice hospitality and inclusion, especially when diverse cultures meet. There are many excellent methods for discernment but not all of them model intercultural awareness, therefore be discerning about discernment itself: appreciate many ways of hearing God together.

7. Believe that it is possible to emerge from our time together refreshed, surprised, and less burdened than when we came.

Our GPS for the discernment journey is

G*RACIOUS*
P*RESENCE OF THE*
S*PIRIT*

THE ROADMAP

While the basic roadmap for discernment has some elements in common…

- ↔ it is grounded in prayer and scripture
- ↔ it is embodied and particular in persons, groups and settings
- ↔ it honors human experience and tradition in their wide diversity

…your particular roadmap for discernment will be unique and varied. Decide as an individual or group how you will outline your roadmap, choosing one or more "modes of transportation" and trust the Spirit as you begin to travel without knowing your destination.

One roadmap for discernment might look like this:

- ↔ Begin with prayer, making space through both silence and words for the guidance of the Spirit.
- ↔ Name the question(s) to be discerned. Identify what is at stake and for whom. Listen for the question behind the questions.

↔ Become open to the power of Scripture to tell our stories and God's stories. Engage in *Lectio Divina*.

↔ Ponder and discuss the intersections between the story of the person in discernment, the story of Christ and of Christ's church, and the story of the future that is still unfolding.

↔ Enter into silence as needed (and often it is more needed than we imagine).

↔ Invite the guidance of the Spirit while reflecting: What are possible responses to the question in discernment? Does the question need to be modified? In which direction is God beckoning?

↔ Sit in silence with a possible answer. How does it resonate with or cause tension to your body and spirit? Know that waiting is an option if clarity cannot be discerned.

↔ Decide on next steps.

↔ End with prayer.

MODES OF TRANSPORTATION:

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FOR DISCERNMENT

MEDITATION

pondering one word or phrase in our hearts

STUDY

seeking resources to better understand a question and its possible options and/or impacts

SUBMISSION

releasing the need to get our own way

CONFESSION

examining our thoughts, hearts and lives with humility and with a determination to respond in new or fuller ways to God's direction

SERVICE

acting with hospitality and bearing another's burdens

GUIDANCE

testing individual sense of direction (call) within a wider community, especially within the body of Christ

WAITING

breathing. taking in the sights, sounds, smells, thoughts, and feelings while waiting. listening. paying attention.

LECTIO DIVINA

reading scripture slowly and repeatedly, first listening with your heart's ear for phrases or words that stand out, then reflecting on that word or phrase, reading yet again with prayer, and then resting in silence

CELEBRATION

naming, appreciating life's joys as a source of strength

SHARING STORIES

reflecting individually or in community: When do you feel closest to God? When have you felt distant? When have you experienced God's guidance? Have you experienced a time when God seemed to say "No" or when you said "No" to God? Tell a story about why you are convinced that the Spirit is still moving in this world.

DISCERNMENTARIAN

appointing one person in a group to listen and watch for the Spirit during meetings. this person (or persons, if the group takes turns in the role) may interrupt the meeting to call for prayer, silence, storytelling, etc.

CLEARNESS COMMITTEE

asking clear questions in the process of seeking clear answers (from the Quaker tradition); such questions may include:

- Is the sense of call from God or from some other impulse?
- How does this person ground her/his seeking?
- In what ways does the person feel already clear? What questions and concerns is s/he seeking to clarify?
- What are the potential benefits to the person's spiritual development? What are the potential benefits to the wider community? What are the potential benefits to the community of faith?
- Is the person prepared to undertake this ministry at this time? Does the person have the skills and resources to carry out this call? What are the risks and how will they be borne? How does this ministry or action fit into existing obligations such as family, work, community, and related needs of time and finances?
- Are additional steps of preparation required before moving forward in outward action?

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

journaling. painting. dreaming. spending time in nature. taking a long bath. walking. sipping tea. singing. talking with friends. seeking a spiritual director. being silent.

ARE WE THERE YET?

WHEN DISCERNMENT LEADS TO DECISION

When discernment turns toward decision-making, ask: Are we ready? What are our next action steps? Who is responsible for what, by when, and with accountability to whom? It may be helpful to restate the original question, to rename the stakeholders who will be impacted by the decision, and to remember the presence of the Spirit. Understand that "No" can be the most faithful answer.

PIT STOPS:

SUGGESTED BOOKS TO FUEL THE JOURNEY

Awakened to a Calling: Reflections on the Vocation of Ministry (Svennungsen and Wiginton, 2005)

eight sermons on vocation serve as a resource for all who make and all who support those making vocational decisions

The Celebration of Discipline (Foster 1998)

outlines twelve spiritual disciples that can lend themselves to a disposition of discernment

Greenhouses of Hope (Baker, 2010)

explores cultures and practices of congregations that inspire young people to explore their vocations and the call to ministry

Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Farnham, Gill, McLean, and Ward, 1991)

offers insight on the intersection of call, discernment and community – the three themes around which the book is organized

Travelers on the Journey (Constantine, 2005)

collection of interviews giving voice to the experiences and wisdom of six pastors across the American South who work on issues facing their communities

BLESSINGS FOR THE JOURNEY

Individual to group/committee/congregation:

Thank you for witnessing to and listening for the Holy Spirit with me. I cannot do this work of discernment alone, and I deeply appreciate this community for journeying with me. I commit myself to strengthening my practices of prayer, study, and attention to the presence of God, so that I might continue to learn how best to welcome the unknown in my life.

Group/committee/congregation to individual:

Thank you for sharing your stories, for witnessing to and listening for the Holy Spirit with us. We believe that the Spirit calls us together for common work and common good; thank you for including us in the work of discernment, because each person's path impacts the whole journey. We appreciate you. We commit ourselves to strengthening our practices of prayer, study, and attention to the presence of God, so that we might continue to learn how best to welcome the unknown in our individual and community life.