

Appendix G

Sample Discernment Processes

The Commission on Ministry has included several different discernment processes. Each of the ones included has benefits and can be adapted to individual situations. It is the desire of the COM that each person seeking to use a discernment team review each process and determine what type of process fits the situation.

Pay particular attention to the first process described, “Discerning God’s Will Together”. This is taken from the book of the same name, Discerning God’s Will Together by Danny Morris and Charles Olsen. The process outlined may look long and complicated, but it does promote an attitude of discernment and an intentionality of establishing a spiritual discipline of “holy listening”. There are some good suggestions about letting go of outside thoughts and about growing the seeds of what God has sown. It is well worth the time to review and then work this process as a group. Using the “individual discernment questions from Part 1, or questions from other discernment processes with “Discerning God’s Will Together” may be helpful.

It is our hope that as congregations become more proficient with discernment teams, they will contribute their processes and adaptations to the COM in order to be added to this notebook.

Discernment Processes Included in this Notebook

Discerning God’s Will Together A Spiritual Practice for the Church by Danny Morris and Charles Olsen.

This is published by Alban Publications. The format can be used to guide an individual discernment process as well as a congregational discernment process.

Minnesota Discernment Process.

A process of individual discernment developed by the Diocese of Minnesota. Each session focuses on a specific aspect of call.

Diocese of Colorado – Holy Orders Handbook

A process of individual discernment developed by the Diocese of Colorado. The focus is more on the development of a person’s ministry. There are scripture passages and prayers designated for each of the sessions.

The Quaker Clearness Committee Model

A much more informal process that can be used in addition to another process or in smaller congregations where most people know each other.

Listening Hearts by Suzanne Farnham, Joseph Gill, R. Taylor McLean, Susan Wand

A more informal process. The book has many helpful ideas about discernment groups and the way they might function.

Discerning God's Will Together

A Guide to Doing Prayerful Discernment

The first page is an overview of this process. More detail about each stage follows.

Selecting the Seed

Framing

Select a subject or an arena for discernment.

May we consider this as a matter of discernment, asking, "God is this your will?"

Preparing the Soil

Grounding

What is the guiding principle?

Shedding

Test for indifference

How many are indifferent to all but God's will?

Rooting

What are the biblical images or texts that come to mind?

Cultivating the Plants

Listening

What voices do we need to hear?

Let us pray in silence, seeking to discern God's will.

Exploring

What are the possible options or paths within the guiding principle?

Improving

Now "better up" each option. Make each the best it can be.

Harvesting the Yield

Weighing (the options)

List the fruits.

Consolation or desolation

Does the Spirit lure you?

Using biblical imagination

Are we ready to close? Does this matter need more prayer and reflection?

Closing

May we proceed in the way just stated?

Check for consensus.

Resting

Test of the heart.

Consolation? Desolation?

Discernment Process

Selecting the Seed

Framing - Identify and clarify the question

In order to determine if a subject is a realistic discernment issue, framing is essential

Helps clarify what we should pick up and what we should lay down.

Often in a meeting, a question or problem is no sooner stated than a barrage of remedies begins.

Resting in uncertainty goes against the grain.

Feel pressure of time

Quick solutions demonstrate efficiency

Moving too quickly may cover the difficult question

The question itself does not necessarily tell us what level of response is appropriate.

If we raise and consider questions carefully we may detect an unstated need that may be important to address.

When considered seriously, a question often changes with time and reflection.

It is important to provide opportunity for people first to ask questions that establish the needed information and then allow time to raise questions that get beneath the surface.

Members of a community intent on discernment must be deeply united to Christ – not only to find an answer, but to ask the right question in the first place.

Probing questions engage us in ways that help us to discover things for ourselves.

Good questions can open us up to the creative flow of the Spirit.

Well framed questions can draw entire group into a search for truth that enables its members to develop fuller insights together.

Identifies the focus for discernment of God's will

Clearly stated – agreed upon by group “God, what are you guiding me/us to do?”

Test the sense of the group – “May we consider this as a matter for discernment?”

Need to be able to sense the response of the group (leader).

Preparing the Soil

Grounding - Gather information and ideas

“What is the guiding principle?”

This sets the boundaries for discernment

This principle becomes definitive

The guiding principle should be specific to the issue and should define the boundaries of what will be discussed and the aim of the discernment effort.

The guiding principle may be confirmed by scripture or from a previously determined mission or vision statement.

The group may struggle to identify the guiding principle.

The leader may want to prepare a tentative guiding principle in order to save time for the larger group.

If there is controversy about which principle should guide discernment, the leader may suggest a more generic guiding principle – such as “God’s will, nothing more, nothing less; nothing else”

Shedding – means to name and then lay aside anything that will deter the person or group from focusing on God’s will as the ultimate value

“What needs to die in me/us in order for God’s gifts and direction to find room in our lives?”

Shedding means to suspend assumptions – doesn’t mean getting rid of them, but naming them for everyone to see.

In discernment, “indifference” is a positive word – means, “I don’t value anything as much as I value knowing and doing God’s will”

“What am I willing to let die to give God room to start something new?”

“What will I lay aside or leave behind so that I will be open to new gifts of grace or new expressions of ministry?”

Indifference is not easy to attain. People may be at different places in this ability.

The process of indifference is not optional for people who want to be serious about discerning God’s will.

The group process of coming to indifference may include openly talking about the issue of giving up personal agendas and coming to indifference for the greater good of knowing the Divine will.

The process may form the group as community.

Test for indifference.

“How many are indifferent to all but God’s will?”

the question is not voted on, but each person should consider this in his or her own mind and heart

It is best if everyone affirms his or her indifference, but if that cannot be done, it is better for the group to know the heart of each person – knowing where each person stands will help the group work through the process

Shedding involves a level of trust – each person will share at what ever level they feel comfortable.

The leader invites shedding in proportion to the issue.

The leader may invite the group to move from understanding themselves as individuals to sensing that they are united on indifference as a community.

“Are we willing to let something die to give God room to start something new?”

“What will we lay aside or leave behind so that we will be open to new gifts of grace or new expressions of ministry?”

Rooting

“What Biblical images or texts come to mind?”

Suggest scripture that relates to the issue for discernment

Images, themes, stories or people in Scripture that make connections with the issue they are considering (don’t have to defend the choice)

Go beyond Biblical to Christian tradition and the history of the local congregation – arts and hymns of the Church

Recalling stories from other sources help the group form a corporate memory.

May move into silent prayer.

Cultivating the Plants

Listening

Participants should see themselves as colleagues.

Christ speaks to his church in a variety of ways and through a variety of people.

All members respect the views of each member – and even invite views of each member.

“Whose voices do we need to hear?”

Listening is essential in discernment.

To one another

To cries of people in need

To Spirit of God

It may include

Gathering information

Conducting interviews with people outside the group

Listen to voices on the edge as well as those in the center

The leader may include time of silent prayer so the group can listen to inner prompting of God’s spirit.

Should be focused on discernment issue

Time devoted to silence should be announced (watch the clock)

Participants may scatter and return at specified time

Sitting in silence after prayer may allow more openness to the Holy Spirit

Be aware of deep, inner feelings

Feelings of consolation and desolation

Be aware of deep feelings, while praying

Joy, peace, sense of right, movement toward God
(consolation)

Distress, ill-at-ease, troubled, concerned, confused
(desolation)

May experience both, but one will dominate

Be sensitive to the feelings throughout silence – continue to pray and to listen until sense of discernment has come.

Invite members to talk about their experience if desired.

Stay in prayer and silence as long as it takes to discern God’s will.

Exploring

“What are possible options or paths within the guiding principles?”

list options on paper

In discernment, nothing is to be hidden or ignored. All suggestions may shed light on the subject.

Identify as many options or alternative paths as possible.

Goal is to identify all possible directions or alternatives each option may be finally put before the group – determine if it needs to be restated for more clarity.

Improving

“Now improve each option. Make each option the best it can be.”

May work together on this or spend time in silence before reporting to the group.

Through discernment, God’s will is more likely to be found in the most rather than in the least.

The leader tries to pull together what has been improved, prior to the weighing of options and closing.

At this time – the leader...

- Is interested in where the group is at this point in the process

- Listens for direction which the process takes, for points of clarity, or conclusions and leadings and offers them to the group for response

- Refines a statement that discussion may reshape

- “Is anyone uncomfortable with the directions just stated?”

Harvesting the Yield

Weighing

This allows the discerning person or group to move toward a preference for the paths or options which have been identified and improved.

“How can we come to a preference for a particular path?”

More human judgment is involved in this step.

While using various means of coming to wisdom – realize that this is Holy Ground – we are trusting the indwelling Spirit to be actively engaged in the process.

Methods that can be used

1. draw a line down the middle of the page and list pros and cons
2. list the fruits that each path would produce
3. “Are any from God’s Spirit?” “Are any rooted in the devil’s work of making sin attractive?” “Do any arise from the drive of human ego?”
4. 5 way test
 - a. is it filled with what is good for all
 - b. is it heavy with the fear of God
 - c. is it genuine in the feelings that underlie it
 - d. is it lightweight because of human show or because of some inward trust toward novelty
 - e. has the burden of vain glory lessened its merit
5. place each path near the heart
 - a. is there consolation – a sense of peace and movement toward God
 - b. is there desolation – a sense of dis-ease and movement away from God
6. practice of silence and solitude, allow Spirit to “lure” you to a particular path
7. guided meditation
 - a. Read John 14:1-3, Jesus offers to go ahead and prepare a “place” for us in God’s “house”. Imagine entering a large mansion-type house, Jesus meets and greets you at the door, How does he greet you? What does he say? He escorts you step by step up a long spiral stairway. At the top, you sit together on a bench in a large, round open hallway that is flooded with natural light from a skylight. Around the hallway are several doors – in fact, the same number of doors as options you are considering in your discernment. When you are ready, Jesus offers to accompany you to each door, then gently opens them one at a time, allowing you to peer into each room. What do you see in each?

8. guided imagery
 - a. Select a symbol – something you could draw or fashion for each option.
 - b. In your imagination, take a trip to a chapel or a beautiful secluded meadow with a reflection pond. Upon arrival, allow colorful appointments to embellish your holy place. Invite a holy and wise person to enter the space and greet this Sage. Receive the Sage’s greeting in return.
 - c. Then, as you sit together, imagine each symbol which you have selected entering the space, interacting with the environment and with each other until they come to rest. Note where and how they rest and in what relationships. Then say good-bye to each symbol. Receive the Sage’s parting words and gestures, and return to the location of your discernment.

Leader needs to be open to the possibility that more time may be needed.

Test for clarity and direct group accordingly.

Decision is not subject to a vote.

Try to sense the response of the group.

Offer a choice – “I sense we are ready to respond,” or, “I sense you may wish to pray and consider this matter further.”

If the leader senses the group is not ready to proceed, may suggest more time is needed.

Be definite in offering an alternative time for further consideration.

Later in the meeting

Another day

End of the meeting

This should be negotiated by the group and strictly honored.

Closing

This step is no longer in dialogue mode where ideas are explored – opening for wisdom and new sight.

This is closing down on a decision or new direction.

We can’t keep matters up in the air forever.

Steps to follow in bringing closure

1. test for consensus
 - a. "I like the proposition as stated"
 - b. "I am concerned, but will support the proposition"
 - i. this is basic affirmation – means its been discussed thoroughly, person might state it differently, this may not be exactly the statement the person would like, but it is close enough
 - ii. give the group a healthy warning to be careful and thoughtful
 - iii. this is a request to not rush to judgment without due consideration
 - c. "I am uneasy for these reasons, but will stand aside"
 - d. non-consensus "I cannot support the proposition"
 - i. the body has not reached full consensus on the matter
 - ii. at this point, the group may choose to stop the process or give the subject more consideration
 - iii. if efforts to reach consensus fail and the person cannot in good conscious change his or her response, leader may ask the person if he or she feels able to step aside so as not to block the rest of the group. The person's reasons for non support would be recorded
 - e. Seriously divided means
 - i. No consensus
 - ii. There are contrary feelings
 - iii. Group has argumentative attitude about the outcome
 - f. Not ready to conclude means
 - i. More time is needed
 1. for prayer
 2. for information gathering
 3. discussion
 - g. impasse means
 - i. members too far apart to anticipate consensus
2. proceed in the following way
 - a. reconsider guiding principles, test again for indifference, repeat rest of the discernment process
 - b. take time for further prayer and reflection
 - c. cast lots
 - i. when situation offers several good choices and the group doesn't want to vote down a good option and make it a loser
 - ii. the option drawn by lot will be chosen
 - iii. agree to this procedure ahead of the action
 - d. appoint one person to decide for the group
 - i. all must agree to follow the decision of this one person
 - e. vote by majority rule – sting of voting is lessened if everyone feels he or she has been heard

- f. count only “yes” votes
- g. drop it – celebrate the discernment, drop it, and move on

Resting

“Is this a comfortable place to be?”

This becomes the final movement in the process.

“Is our decision God’s will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else?”

Resist the temptation to rush forward even when the matter seems properly concluded.

If time permits, invite the group to rest in the decision – how does it sound in the parking lot, after a night’s sleep, when explaining it to a friend?

Put the matter to the test of the heart

Does it bring consolation or desolation? Draw us closer to God and each other or result in distress and move the group away from God?

When finished with a discernment

Review the experience

Make notes on how it went, what you learned about dynamics and principles of discernment and consensus and what you discovered about God’s will.

Minnesota Discernment Process

- Session 1 Getting Acquainted
1. Discerner distributes a written draft of his/her autobiography and call.
 2. Group establishes overall organization and schedule for the meetings.
 3. Group (including discerner) discusses what it is to have a sense of “call” in one’s life – how it is known, sensed, experienced, heard, learned, etc. and how we respond to it.
 4. Group becomes sensitive to the following characteristics (especially in the discerner, but also in each other):
 - Communication skills
 - Ability to relate to others
 - Personal integrity and self-esteem
 - Physical health and energy
 - Intellectual gifts and abilities
- Session 2 Biography of Discerner
1. Discerner reflects on his/her autobiography, giving insight into personality, strengths and weaknesses.
 2. Group discusses (with discerner) the significant life experiences that have shaped the discerner’s present identity and life direction.
 3. Group becomes sensitive to the discerner’s sense of strengths and weaknesses (limitations).
 4. Discerner re-writes autobiography after the session.
- Session 3 Insights into Ministry
1. Discerner distributes his/her re-written autobiography.
 2. Group discusses the distinctions between the ministries of the laity, deacons, priests, and bishops.
 3. Group (with discerner) discusses the meanings and differences that distinguish the various ministries.
 4. Group becomes sensitive to new ideas, concerns and points of confusion, discovering each other’s understanding of ministry.
- Session 4 Discerner’s Present Ministry and Theology
1. Discerner presents a description of his/her current ministry.
 - How is this ministry being validated?
 - How is this different from the ministry of deacon, priest or bishop?
 - Would the discerner’s ministry be enriched by ordination?

2. Discerner shares and group discusses how they relate to
 - Prayer
 - The sacraments
 - Scripture
 - Authority
 - Obedience

Session 5 Discerner's Sense of Call

1. Discerner distributes a description of his/her sense of "call".
 - From God
 - From the community
 - In the context of his/her family and friends
2. The group (with discerner) sensitively discusses what had been written, recognizing that the ability to struggle with and express the deep sense of personal relationship with God and others is central to creative ministry. The discerner is challenged to risk and speak deeply about his/her call.

Session 6 What does the Discerner Bring to this Call

1. Discerner presents written insights and reflections on "moral character"
 - What that means to the discerner
 - How what that means shows in his or her life.
 - How the discerner copes with failure to live up to his/her standard of behavior.
2. Discerner's work experiences – how these experiences relate to the discerner's sense of call?
3. What vision does the discerner bring to the future ministry? (To what extent is it open-ended?)
4. Does the discerner have any burdensome financial obligations?

Session 7. Whom Does the Discerner Bring to the Call?

1. Discerner's spouse or partner also attends the session.
2. How does the discerner's family relate to the call?
 - Realistic vision?
 - What is the role of the family in the decision to explore ordination to the priesthood?
 - What about the potential personal and financial stress with the seminary training?
3. Are there other family pressures involved in the decision?

- Session 8 Committee Reflection
1. Group meets without discerner.
 - Each committee member brings written observations/reflections to share.
 - An outline of the reflections is prepared to share with the discerner.
 2. Group meets with discerner
 - Outline is shared with the discerner
 - Discussion
 - Discerner has the opportunity to discuss areas he/she feel/thinks have been discovered or unexplored.
 3. Committee chair drafts letter for the Vestry following the outline prepared in this session; the draft is circulated among committee membership before Session 9.

Session 9 Final Meeting of the Committee
Committee meets, possibly, over dinner to review comments and suggest improvements for the letter drafted by the chair.

Final Task. Chair presents the letter to the Vestry and responds to their questions.

Taken from: Holy Orders Handbook Diocese of Colorado

A PRAYER, BIBLE AND THEOLOGY STUDY GUIDE FOR THE CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT COMMITTEE

I. The Church

1. Thanksgiving to God for Parish Life in Christ

Collect	“For the Unity of the Church”	BCP pg. 255
Scripture	Deuteronomy 7:6-8 Colossians 3:12-17 I Corinthians 11:23-26 Luke 24:13-35	
Reading	An Outline of the Faith (The Catechism) The Church The Sacraments	BCP pg. 854-855 BCP pg. 857-858
Prayer	“A Litany of Thanksgiving”	BCP pg. 836-837

2. The Ministry of the Laity

Collect	The Prayer – Confirmation Service	BCP pg. 418
Scripture	Deuteronomy 10:12-15 I Corinthians 12:12-28 Ephesians 4:1-16 Matthew 28:16-20	
Reading	The Catechism –The Christian Hope	BCP pg. 861-862
Prayer	A Song of Creation	BCP pg. 88

II. The Ordained Ministry

1. The Ordination of a Priest

Collect	For the Ministry II	BCP pg. 256
Scripture	Isaiah 6:1-8 Ephesians 4:7, 11-16 or I Peter 5:1-4 or Philippians 4:4-9 Matthew 9:35-38 or John 6:35-38; 10:11-18	
Reading	The Ordination of a Priest The Examination	BCP pg. 531-532
Prayer	The Litany for Ordinations	BCP pg. 548-550

2. The Ordination of a Deacon

Collect	For the Ministry II	BCP pg. 256
Scripture	Jeremiah 1:4-9 or Ecclesiasticus. 39: 1-8 Psalm 84 or 119:33-40 II Cor. 4:1-6 or I Tim. 3:8-13 or Acts 6:2-7	
Reading	The Ordination of a Deacon The Examination	BCP pg. 543-544
Prayer	The Litany for Ordinations	BCP pg. 548-550

3. The Pastoral Ministry		
Collect	A Prayer of Self-Dedication	BCP pg. 832
Scripture	Isaiah 55 I Corinthians. 4 I Peter 5:1-11 Matthew 7:7-12	
Reading	The Celebration of a New Ministry: The Induction and Prayer	BCP pg. 561-563
Prayer	A Prayer attributed to St. Francis	BCP pg. 833
4. The Priesthood		
Collect	For the Ministry I	BCP pg. 256
Scripture	I Samuel 2:35 Hebrews 4:14-5:10 John 15:1-17	
Reading	The Ordination of a Priest The Consecration	BCP pg. 533-534
Prayer	Christ Our Passover	BCP pg. 83
5. The Diaconate		
Collect	For Social Service Vocation in Daily Work	BCP pg. 260 or BCP pg. 261
Scripture	Isaiah 42:1-4 or Isaiah 52:13-53; 12 I John 4:7-12 Matthew 25:31-46	
Reading	The Ordination of a Deacon: The Consecration	BCP pg. 545
Prayer	The Song of Simeon	BCP pg. 93
6. The Cost of Ministry		
Collect	Holy Cross Day	BCP pg. 244
Scripture	Revelation 5:6-14 II Corinthians. 5:17-6:16 Matthew 9:35-10:39	
Reading	The Catechism Sin and Redemption	BCP pg. 848-849
Prayer	A Song of Penitence	BCP pg. 90
7. The Discipline of Ministry		
Collect	Second Sunday of Easter	BCP pg. 224
Scripture	Exodus 20:1-20 I Corinthians. 9:16-27 John 21:15-19	
Reading	The Catechism The Ministry	BCP pg. 855-856
Prayer	The Song of Zechariah	BCP pg. 92

III. Prayer and Ministry

1. The Prayer of Union

Collect	Of a Saint III	BCP pg. 250
Scripture	II Chronicles 6:12-21 John 17	
Reading	The Catechism God the Son	BCP pg. 849-850
Prayer	The Second Song of Isaiah	BCP pg. 86

2. Prayer for One Another

Collect	Proper 22	BCP pg. 234
Scripture	Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-19 Philippians 1:3-11 Colossians 1:9-23 II Thessalonians 1:11-12	
Reading	The Catechism The Holy Spirit Prayer and Worship	BCP pg. 852-853 BCP pg. 856-857
Prayer	The Solemn Collects: Good Friday	BCP pg. 277-280

3. The Faithfulness of God

Collect	For Quiet Confidence	BCP pg. 832
Scripture	Lamentations 3:21-33 Romans 8:31-39 Matthew 5:1-12; 6:19-34	
Reading	The Catechism Human Nature God the Father	BCP pg. 845-846 BCP pg. 846
Prayer	You are God	BCP pg. 95

A SUGGESTED OUTLINE FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION SESSIONS
IN THE CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT PROCESS
Diocese of Colorado

The following questions may be helpful for each of the sections. They are intended to assist in opening possible areas of consideration. Most do not have any “right” answers, but are only meant to stimulate thought and discussion.

I. The Church

1. Thanksgiving to God for Parish Life in Christ
 - What does it mean to be God’s chosen people? Chosen for what?
 - How does a group of people become “bound together in love by the one Spirit?” What does this mean?
 - What is the relationship of individual and communal discernment of God’s will for our lives?
 - Why did the disciples on the road to Emmaus not recognize Jesus? What may have gotten in the way? What gets in the way for us?
2. The Ministry of the Laity
 - How have we discerned God’s will for us in our own present vocations?
 - What are our responsibilities as Christians in our present vocations?
 - What gifts do we have that could add to the unity and wholeness of the Body of Christ?
 - How can we be more open to Christ’s presence with us?

II The Ordained Ministry

1. The ordination of a Deacon and a Priest
 - In what way do the ministries of all the baptized, the diaconate and the priesthood differ from one another?
 - What are some indications of being “called” to any particular vocation? To the ordained ministry?
 - What kind of leader is a shepherd? What qualities are needed to be a dictator? To be an example?
2. The Pastoral Ministry
 - What are “pastoral “responsibilities?
 - How can one’s image of God and relationship with God affect pastoral ministry?
 - Is there a difference in the call to pastoral ministry for the laity and the ordained ministry? If so, what is it?

3. The Priesthood
 - What makes a priest? What can we learn from Jesus as High Priest about the role of priest?
 - Is there a role for priest in areas other than specific “parish work” and if so, in what ways?
 - What does it mean, and what difference does it make that it is Christ who chooses us first and not we who first choose Christ?
4. The Diaconate
 - What makes a deacon? What can we learn from Jesus as Servant Lord about the ministry of a deacon?
 - If we are all called to be engaged in serving others (diakonia), why should deacons be ordained?
 - How do deacons carry on Christ’s Servant Ministry?
5. The Cost of Ministry
 - How can we differentiate “taking up your cross” and being a self styled martyr (developing a martyr syndrome)? What are the differences in attitude?
 - How are Christ’s instructions to the apostles related to taking up one’s cross, surrendering one’s willfulness?
 - In what way does the news that we are reconciled make us a new creation? How in our own lives does this good news relate to taking up our own crosses?
 - What is the relationship of “taking up your cross” to self-examination and increased self-awareness?
6. The Discipline of Ministry
 - In what way do our lives reflect the new covenant of reconciliation?
 - How do we reflect God’s place in our lives? How do we feed Christ’s sheep?
 - In what way can we prepare ourselves and nourish ourselves for being ministers of the new covenant?

III Prayer and Ministry

1. The Prayer of Union
 - With whom (or what) do we desire to become united in prayer of union?
 - What are some ways we can open ourselves to, or increase our awareness of, the presence of God, Christ, within us?
 - In what way can the prayer of silence, non-verbal or listening prayer be a prayer of union – with God – with others?

2. Prayer for One Another

- What are some ways we recognize the Holy Spirit within others, within creation, within ourselves?
- How can we increase our awareness of the needs of others, rather than our own projections of what we think they need?
- What are various types of intercessions used in your own verbal or non-verbal prayer for others, and for yourself? What has been most helpful?

3. The Faithfulness of God

- In what way can “sitting in solitude and silence” increase awareness of God’s faithfulness, God’s love?
- What are some of the ways we learn how to trust in God?
- What are some of the experiences you have had which have increased your faith and trust in God?

The Quaker Clearness Committee Model

(referenced in The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life.
Parker Palmer. Jossey-Bass, 1998)

This informal model may be used in conjunction with another discernment process or as a “stand alone” process in small congregations where most of the members know one another.

The purpose of a clearness committee is to “[invite] people to help each other with personal problems while practicing a discipline that protects the sanctity of the soul.” (Although Parker uses the term “problems,” this process can be effectively used in discerning vocation. Much of the Listening Hearts material is based on the clearness committee model.) It works like this.

The discerner brings an issue to a group of 4-5 people she/he has invited to be on the committee. In preparation for their meeting, she/he writes 1-2 pages about the issue, giving a clear statement of the issue, relevant background, and relevant foreground.

The group meets for 2-3 uninterrupted hours, and the discerner is the center of attention. Committee members are forbidden to speak to her/him except to ask open, honest questions. Some attention should be paid to what “open” and “honest” means. Asking the question, “Have you ever considered therapy?” is a leading question – not open and honest. Asking “Have you often felt this way?” is acceptable. The discerner usually answers each question, but has the right to pass. There is lots of silence, and nothing is hurried. Advice and oversimplification from committee members are not allowed.

About 15 minutes before the session ends, the discerner is asked if she/he would like to do some “mirroring”. If not, the group continues with questions. If so, committee members reflect, or mirror, what the discerner said or did, but might not be aware of. “When you talked about X, your voice dropped and you seemed tired, but when you spoke of Y, your energy rose and your eyes got bright.”

There are two levels of confidentiality in effect in a clearness committee. First, what’s said in the meeting stays there. Second, members may not approach the discerner with comments or suggestions, either during or after the meeting.

Of course the clearness committee can (and should) be infused with prayer – both corporate and individual. The group may want to select a convener to keep track of time and to facilitate times for prayer.

From “The Commission on Ministry Handbook”
Diocese of Wyoming 2005

Discernment Process Suggested in Listening Hearts

1. In preparation for the first meeting, the discerner writes a brief biographical sketch tracing the significant threads of experience and background that relate to the question, stating the issue or decision the person is facing and mentioning any information that may be relevant.
2. Convener of the team distributes copies of the biographical sketch to the other team members at least a few days before the meeting. Members will keep the discerner and the rest of the team in prayers before the team meets.
3. When the group assembles, if all do not know one another, they take some time to introduce themselves.
4. The convener opens the meeting with a specified period of silence to permit all to become receptive to God's presence.
5. The convener ends the silence by having the discerner say, in his/her own words, the issue or question of call.
6. The task of the members of the team is to listen prayerfully and raise questions that will help the discerner consider the issue.
7. If the issue being considered is unclear, the first questions need to deal with that. Next, questions to establish relevant background may be in order. Thereafter, the questions should become slower-paced and more reflective.
8. Questions should be concise and presented one at a time. Avoid giving background as to why you are asking a question or explaining the reason for the question. If you are unsure exactly how to phrase the question, it is better to wait silently to let the question develop and become more focused.
9. The background information supplied by the discerner is often fertile soil for questions.
10. Avoid questions such as; "What does God want you to do?" If the person knew the answer, the group would not be gathered for discernment.
11. Members must refrain from giving advice. Do not ask questions that suggest the answer or cloak advice in the guise of questions.
12. It is advisable for the discerner to keep the answers brief because more questions and more silence may provide further clarity.
13. While articulating answers to the questions is usually helpful, the discerner is never obligated to answer any question.

14. The work of God often takes place in the depth of quiet. Preferably, each person will be conscious of permitting a period of prayerful, silence between speakers.
15. Each member of the group needs to help maintain a pace that allows reflection. Any member may ask for a time of silence.
16. Each member of the group needs to help maintain a gentle atmosphere, guarding against any tendency to become confrontational.
17. An atmosphere of open listening needs to be maintained.
18. Each member of the group needs to help ensure that members do not press their own agendas or feelings on the discerner.
19. Each member of the group should ensure that others in the group have the opportunity to speak.
20. About thirty minutes before the meeting is scheduled to end, the convener offers the discerner the opportunity to ask questions of the group.
21. About ten minutes before the end of the meeting, the convener asks the group to determine whether or not another meeting is desirable. If anyone in the group is not comfortable with the direction the discerner seems to be moving, it is important for that person to suggest that the group convenes again.
22. The final five minutes are for free and open prayers which the convener introduces and concludes.
23. At any time during the meeting, a sense that the group has crossed a threshold may emerge. A member may suggest that a common understanding seems to exist. Should this occur, the convener may check this perception with the group, and if verified, begin to conclude the meeting.
24. A meeting or series of meetings can take place without resolution of the issue raised by the discerner. The consensus may be that the group has gone as far as it can for the time being. Should this occur, the desire to “wrap things up” neatly or to come to closure on a particular question should be resisted.
25. It is essential that what goes on in the meeting is absolutely confidential unless the discerner expressly chooses otherwise.
28. Everyone should come to meetings prepared to schedule a time for another meeting.
27. At the conclusion of the final session all discerners should return their copies of the biographical sketch to the discerner.