

Young Adult Hospitality House Webinar

January 16, 2013

RESOURCE PACKET

Presbyterian Mission Agency/ Young Adult Volunteers

Faith 3/ Cousins Foundation



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January 2013

F A I T H 3

Faith Active in the Head, Heart & Hands

HOSPITALITY HOUSES

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Houses for Hospitality

Faith & Service

There is a powerful movement in our culture that calls young people to be active and involved in the community, engaging with important service agencies and committing to causes and issues that deal with justice, poverty and the environment. High school and college students are committing significant portions of their time and energy to service. And many college students, following graduation, choose to engage in a year of service both domestically and abroad.

Prior to the founding of AmeriCorps, faith communities have had a long history of supporting young adults in service. Programs like the Brethren Volunteer Services, Mennonite Volunteer Services and the Jesuit Volunteer Corps have been sending full-time young adult volunteers into the community for over fifty years. In 1994 the Young Adult Volunteer Program (YAV) was founded in order to encourage recent Presbyterian graduates to spend a year in service.

With the advent of AmeriCorps and programs like Teach for America and City Year, more and more young adults are engaging in service. However, most of these programs exist outside of faith communities. Indeed, the current service model has, for the most part, separated faith and service.

Time and again we have seen young adults commit themselves to service. But these young adults do not want to be locked into a sectarian institution that does not value them or their work. They want to change the world—and they don't see how the church will help in that pursuit. At the same time, however, many of these young people self-identify as "spiritual".

While the identification "Spiritual, not religious" may drive clergy and parents crazy, it suggests that theirs is a generation motivated to serve according to faith commitments despite the fact that they have yet to find a community of faith that inspires or understands them.

An Idea

Imagine: A senior at Macalester College graduates from school, applies for, and is accepted to serve with Hands on Atlanta. He doesn't know anyone when he moves down South. He is looking not just for a place to live but for a place to belong. Where some might look for a party house, others might want to find a place where they can connect their commitment to serve with their spiritual exploration.

This is where the church needs to step up. Despite an avowed interest in exploring and engaging in some of our most complex social questions, very few of these newcomers to our communities will seek out a church or will show up for worship. Even if they do, we must ask ourselves if our welcome and our worship that will entice them to return.

Year after year we are seeing tremendous growth in faith-based volunteer programs geared toward young adults. The Episcopal Service Corps has nearly doubled in size during each of the past two years. At St. Mary's Church in Harlem, New York, 140 college students applied for five service placements. The Jesuit Volunteer Corps received three times as many applications last year as they did the year before.

Yet the church has not developed its capacity to effectively respond to the complex needs and desires of young people in connecting their faith and service. At some level, the reason we have not yet succeeded is because we have either been unaware or uninterested. We have not had the political—or perhaps I should say the religious—will to meet these young adults where they are, to listen to them, and to open our hearts, our churches, and our homes to them.

There are at least 100,000 young adults who serve in some type of yearlong service program around the country. Many of these are part of AmeriCorps or VISTA, but there are other programs as well. We know from studies that, despite the lack of religious identity among many in this group, the majority of these young adults see their faith, or their spiritual grounding, as a central motivator to their service. A major source of fulfillment for them is the opportunity to live out that faith. Yet less than two percent of these volunteers do their service in the context of a faith-based program. And out of the 1,500 or so volunteers that do, two-thirds are organized by Catholic programs. In the Presbyterian Church there are fewer than thirty young adults sponsored to serve in the US each year. The United Methodist Church has even fewer.

My experience with young adults tells me that at least 50% of these 100,000 young adult volunteers want to engage in some type of spiritual exploration. Out of that group, many are interested in faith formation and vocational discernment.

Our goal as the church universal is to reach out and connect with this young idealistic, passionate and talented group of young people and treat each one of them as if they were our own children—because they are.

Extending Hospitality

Our new neighbors are not making much money. They need an affordable and safe place to live. They are looking for like-minded friends with whom they can explore their faith and discern their vocation.

We ought to commit to establishing [Houses of Hospitality](#) where young adults live in an intentional community, establish a rule of community life and engage in regular vocational discernment activity. Churches need not purchase new houses, but can seek opportunities within their own communities. Houses of Hospitality might be old manses that are owned by the church, they might be buildings that are owned by parishes, or perhaps apartments rented by the congregation. Volunteers would be expected to pay rent, but at a rate below market value. We might also invite young adults to participate in home stays for the year with members of a congregation. With minimal expense, we have the opportunity to welcome young adults into our communities and our lives in ways that are meaningful for all involved.

The Hospitality model is not limited to providing affordable housing. We must also encourage our congregants to welcome those in service in other ways. Consider giving congregations the opportunity to hold a weekly meal for young adults who are serving in yearlong placements. Such meals will offer authentic encounters for fellowship, conversation, and spiritual formation. During the month of August, as young adults seek housing in a new city, we might also open the doors of our churches, giving them temporary housing as they begin their year of service.

What's in it for the church? Everything.

Houses of Hospitality offer us a chance to tangibly respond to the call of the gospel. It also offers we Christians the opportunity to relate our passion for service and justice to the very same passions these young adults feel. The energy and inspiration of those in service will certainly reawaken our vocational call to be in service to our neighbor and will renew our relevance to a faith-weary society.

Not all young adults will be reached or moved by our intentional efforts to welcome and engage them in community. But for the vast majority, even if they are not Christian or not interested in being part of a Christian tradition, they will have a greater sense of what Christianity is about and will recognize the allies in their midst.

Many of those we encounter will feel engaged in our communities of faith and will be the people who attend and provide the leadership of the church for the next fifty years.

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Some will find in their heart a call to professional Christian ministry and will commit their lives and their vocations to a prophetic witness to the gospel. They will seek to live it out every day in their service to the world

As some who feel called to ministry of the Word and Sacrament pursue theological education, they will embark on the road to ordination knowing they are equipped for and supported on the journey. They, along with all of these others, will be the ones who repair the breach between society and the church. Everyone will be needed, welcomed, and celebrated.

What's in it for the church? Rather than being labeled as narrow-minded and judgmental, rather than being stereotyped as mean-spirited and offensive, we will, once again, be known as Christians by our love.

What's in it for the church? They will know we are Christians by our love.

Getting Started: A Check List for Sponsoring Congregations

Housing

(Ideally this will not cost the congregation any money, but it should be prepared to cover some initial costs.)

If the congregation is providing housing

- Consider what you need to have in place before you commit to establishing a house.
- Determine how much money the church is ready to spend on housing costs for a year and plan accordingly.
- Consider ways to help subsidize the rent per person so that living in this House of Hospitality is both affordable and attractive to the volunteer.
- Do you need to have participants signed up and pay their first months' rent?
- One strategy to consider is to have some of these young adults live with members of the congregation for several weeks or months as a critical mass of housemates are identified
- The church should lease the house and pay the deposit if necessary
- The utilities should be registered in the name of the church
- Furnish the house/apartment with beds, tables and kitchen utensils

Congregations should **establish a host team** that will:

- Look after the participants
- Provide comforts and connection
- Organize weekly meals for the house members
- Plan events that connect the congregation with the people living in the house

Congregations should identify one person, preferably the senior pastor, who will be the final arbitrator of any conflicts, particularly around the issue of removing a member from living in the community.

Getting Started: Establishing a Rule for Community Life

Establishing a communal rule for life is essential for any communal living. Below please find appropriate questions and categories which you may want to consider when establishing a “rule”.

- The Documentation
 - Does your program already have a set of rules that set the standard for community life in an intentional community?
 - Are participants required to sign an agreement?
 - When do participants first see the “rule”?
 - Do residents have an opportunity to ask questions about the rule before they sign? With whom does this conversation take place? Other residents? Congregations?
- Establishing the Theme of the House
 - What type of input do new volunteers have on the rules for community life?
 - What type of opportunities do volunteers who are ending their term of service have?
 - Is the House described as explicitly “Christian”? If not, how does the community define itself?
 - If a House is already in place:
 - What has worked in regards to the set of rules that you currently have?
 - What has not worked?
 - What resources have you used in establishing the “rule”?
 - To each participant: If you could change up to three things about the Rules of Community Life that you have now, what would those changes be?
- Aspects of Community Life
 - Security
 - Have rules been established for house lock-up and security? (ex: Is the house expected to be locked at all times? Are people asked to leave lights on?)
 - Food and Drink
 - How is food paid for (pooled resources, funds from the program? Other?)?
 - How are shopping, cooking and cleaning handled?
 - Do you have meals together? How often? What are expectations around communal meals?
 - Are guests invited to communal meals? Is there an expectation that housemates will be informed of a guest’s presence? Are there any rules as to when guests can come for dinner?
 - Daily Life
 - What expectations do you have around daily chores (Cooking? Dishes? Trash? Cleaning? Bathrooms?)?
 - Guests and Significant Others
 - Do you allow overnight guests?

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- How do you approach significant others? Are they allowed to stay over? Is there a limit as to how long they can stay?
- Other Involvements and Income
 - What is the expectation for communicating a housemate's overnight absence?
 - Do members have other part-time jobs?
 - Are those jobs over (work at Starbucks) or under (babysitting) the table?
- Faith Formation, Spiritual Exploration and Vocational Discernment
 - Are there expectations that members will engage in a particular spiritual practice?
 - What is that practice (meals together, bible study, praying?)
 - Are members expected to participate in or initiate community retreats?
 - Is your faith activity explicitly Christian or does it involve other faith traditions?
 - Are members of the Houses expected to develop a connection with a local faith community?
 - Are there persons in the community who serve as a resource for members of the House (a local pastor, a community volunteer)?
- Engaging other volunteer programs
 - Are there other faith-based young adult volunteer programs in your community?
 - Will there be an expectation to engage with members of other young adult volunteer programs?
 - Do you reach out to other young adult volunteer programs (Teach for America, City Year, VISTA)?
- Facing Challenges
 - What rules do you have in place when community life is not going well?
 - To whom do volunteers report if there is a problem?
 - How is conflict resolved?
 - Who is involved in conflict resolution?
 - Who has the ultimate say as to what happens in regard to resolving the conflict?
- Removing members who do not live up to Community Life Standards
 - Do you have a system set up to honorably (fairly and effectively) remove people from the community?
 - How would you structure such a system?
 - What kind of help is provided to someone who has been asked to leave the community?
 - If someone leaves the community, do they automatically terminate his/ her service placement?

Getting Started: Creating a Weekly Conversation

- The church should plan to host a weekly meeting for young adults in the community who are interested in being part of an ongoing conversation around faith and service.

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- The congregation should identify a leader in the church, perhaps a youth pastor or an interested lay leader, who will lead said conversations.
- Your faith community should establish a weekly meal calendar surrounding the conversations.
- Please note that *Vespers* offers weekly lesson plans to facilitate conversations around personal development, social justice, spiritual practice and community living.

The Vespers Curriculum

[Vespers](#) is an open resource available to anyone or any group. It has been designed for groups of peers who want to have focused conversations about faith and service, for faith communities who want to support young adults engaged in service and for faith-based national organizations who sponsor or support year-of-service programs.

Vespers may be used as a single, year-long curriculum or it may be isolated to its component parts. Each month, or curriculum block, has a theme that is reinforced over the four weeks of that month. Within each block, there are four suggested lesson plans that build on the theme for that block, engaging the four “pillars” of this curriculum: volunteer personal development experience (self), spiritual practice (self and Spirit), community life and simple living (self and community) and social justice (self and the world).

The themes are drawn from the volunteer’s service work, the church year, issues and challenges likely to be faced through service and in the community, and broader strategies for effectively working to build a more equitable and just world.

The authors of *Vespers* have assembled this curriculum such that it offers a complete journey through the year, with a beginning, middle and end. Individuals and groups may wish to access *Vespers* in different ways. Some might walk through it from beginning to end while others may pick and choose what they like and add in their own flavor as they move forward. Both approaches, and everything in-between, are encouraged and applauded.

Vespers Blocks at a Glance

August: Community-Making Yourself at Home—Issues addressed include orientation to the community, building a communal home, and affordable housing.

September: Work- Contributing to the Common Good—Issues addressed include goal setting, work as a means of prayer, the labor market, and issues of a living wage.

October: Education-Teaching and Learning—Issues addressed include power relationships, journaling, education in family and community, and disparities in our public education system.

November: Governance- Strengthening Democracy—Issues addressed include working with conflict and differing styles of governance, self-governance as spiritual practice, rules of community life, and the political process.

December: Creativity- Engaging the Arts—Issues addressed include the challenge of being present, preparing for Advent, beauty in the dead of winter, and art as a vehicle for social change.

January: Immigration-Welcoming the Stranger—Issues addressed include rekindling enthusiasm for the year ahead, praying with scripture, exploring difference and division within the volunteer community, and welcoming the stranger.

February: Reconciliation-Preventing Violence and Restoring Relationship—Issues addressed include working through our “shadow sides”, practicing forgiveness, successful conflict resolution in community, restorative justice, and truth and reconciliation.

March: Energy- Stepping Lightly on the Earth—Issues addressed include the wilderness and Lent, the freedom of limits, models for sustainability, and addressing climate change.

April: Sustenance- Eating and Drinking—Issues addressed include sustainable and just eating and drinking practices, the meaning of the Eucharist, the spiritual practice of discipline, food justice, and access to healthy food in cities.

May: Wholeness- Accessing Health and Fullness of Life—Issues addressed include what it takes to be whole and healthy, honoring the body, healthy communities and families, and seeking justice in healthcare.

June: Economy- Managing Money and Wealth—Issues addressed include engaging with our personal stories of wealth and consumption, defining abundance and “enough”, alternative investing in communities and people, and a framework for understanding poverty.

July: Celebration- Making Peace and Moving On—Issues addressed include honoring others and the year past, transitions and changes, understanding and telling your life story, and taking what you have learned with you on life’s journey.

Hospitality, the Church and Young Adults **Claiming Hospitality as our Christian Identity**

We, as Christians, are called by gospel and our commitment to hospitality to welcome and support young adults who are serving in our communities.

Each year tens of thousands of young adults leave campus after graduation and move around the country to serve in local communities through such programs as AmeriCorps, Teach for America and City Year.

Many of these young adults find themselves moving to communities in parts of the country where they have little connection to anyone.

Very few of these young activists will seek out a church when they arrive. Many of these young adults grew up in a faith community, but find little connection between their passion for service and the life and the practice of the church. Many will claim to be spiritual but not religious.

At the same time, few churches make a concerted effort to reach out to welcome and support these transient new members of our communities. This initiative is a call to church leaders, clergy and lay alike, to boldly yet thoughtfully reach out to invite and welcome.

As we invite and welcome these young adults, we must do so not necessarily to join our churches or sing in our choirs, but to be welcomed and supported by our communities of faith because of their call to service, which is also the call of the Gospel.

Meeting the Needs of these Young Adults: Housing, Fellowship and Discernment

One of the biggest challenges that these young adults face is finding affordable housing. Most of these young people receive very limited stipends and find themselves scrambling to find roommates and to establish a community life that is safe, affordable and affirming.

In addition, many of these young adults find themselves isolated in their new environments. Because most are new to the community they are at first likely to know only the people where they serve. And given the work they are doing and the challenges they are facing, many can feel overwhelmed and under-supported as they encounter issues of poverty in intimate ways. Many are looking for opportunities for fellowship with not only their peers but others in the community.

We also know that many of these young adults, while not necessarily identifying strongly with a denomination, are interested in exploring their spiritual life. For

many, the connection between faith and service is vague if not absent. Yet many remain interested in having opportunities for conversation and reflection with others who have made similar commitments to the community and who have a passion for service and social justice.

The Church offering Hospitality to Young adults

Our church needs to develop strategies and programs to demonstrate hospitality and engagement that will invite, welcome and support these young adults. Some of the ways we can do this include housing, food, fellowship and spiritual and theological exploration.

Houses of Hospitality

Churches should consider establishing houses of hospitality where four to six young adults share a house or apartment. In these church-sponsored housing accommodations, young adults can live in an intentional community under a rule of community life founded on Christian principals of simplicity, spiritual practice and communal living.

If identifying and supporting a specific house or apartment is not feasible for logistical or financial reasons, a congregation could reach out to members who might have empty bedrooms in their homes (empty nesters?) where these young people can live while they serve. While such a strategy doesn't offer the same type of experience for community life that a designated house does, it still offers an opportunity for hospitality and connection to the church.

Food, Fellowship and Theological Discussion

Even when a church chooses not to offer housing opportunities for young adults serving full time in the community, it can still be active and supportive by offering weekly meals and a structured conversation based on a year-long curriculum that is designed to connect their service with their faith journey. Currently a curriculum is available online that a congregation can use as a whole or as a base. When possible, the church will organize an orientation, as well as mid- and an end-of-year year retreats that will strengthen the community, enrich this young person's experience and build on the gospel.

A Check-List for A Sponsoring Congregation to Getting Started

Housing

(Ideally this will not cost the congregation any money but it must be prepared to cover some lost costs.)

If the congregation is providing housing:

- Consider what you need to have in place before you commit to establishing a house.
- How much money is the church ready to spend on housing costs for a year and plan accordingly.
- Consider ways to help subsidize the rent per person so that living in this house of hospitality is both affordable and attractive to the volunteer.
- Do you need to have participants signed up and pay their first months rent?
- One strategy to consider is to have some of these young adults live with members of the congregation for several weeks or months before a critical mass of housemates are identified
- The church should lease for the house and pay the deposit if necessary
- The utilities should be registered in the name of the church
- Furnish the house/ apartment with beds, tables and kitchen utensils

Congregations should establish a host team that will:

- Look after the participants
- Provide comforts and connection
- Organize meals for the house members
- Plan events that connect the congregation with the people living in the house

Congregations will identify one person, preferably the senior pastor, who will be the final arbitrator of any conflict, particularly around the issue of removing a member from living in the community.

Establish a Rule for Community Life

Any host congregation can make their own rules, but it is important to provide clarity about what rules are established before people move into the house and what rules will be negotiated. A resource for developing a community rule of life will be available online beginning June, 2012.

Creating a weekly conversation around theological exploration and vocational discernment.

- The church should plan to host a weekly meeting for young adults in the community who are interested in being part of an ongoing conversation around faith and service.

- The congregation will identify a leader in the church, perhaps a youth pastor or an interested lay leader, who will lead the weekly conversations.
- Your faith community should establish a calendar where someone from the church prepares a meal for the weekly diner and conversation.
- There is an online curriculum that offers weekly lesson plans to facilitate conversations around personal development, social justice, spiritual practice and community living:
<http://faithinservice.pbworks.com/w/page/36755438/FrontPage>

Recruitment

People often ask me where to find young adults who are serving in the community. Not to be too cheeky, but you go out and look for them! They are all around. They are in coffee shops, at the YMCA, happy hours and yes sometimes even in the churches. They are our children, siblings, and friends of our friends. They are not hard to find but it does take some looking. Reach out to the people you know in the service world: contact the United Way, talk to an administrator in your school district, see if a college or university has a service program that involves full time members.

AmeriCorps is not the only place where young adults are serving, but it is the largest. More than 70,000 individuals serve in AmeriCorps each year and while they represent a wide range of ages, the largest age group is in their 20's. If you want to find out what AmeriCorps and VISTA programs you have in your community you can go to cns.gov. Each state has its own commission. You can find the contact for your state by going to:
<http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/contact/statecommission.asp>

Someone in that office can give you the names of the agencies that have AmeriCorps and VISTA members. AmeriCorps, VISTA, Teach for America, City Year, Youth Build, and Public Allies are some of the big names in the AmeriCorps movement. The larger AmeriCorps programs often have a housing committee to find housing opportunities for members.

When creating Austin Theological Seminary's intentional community, Jack Branden shares the story of how they filled their house.

"In the spring of 2011, the Office of Admissions charged with launching this program, contacted AmeriCorps sites in Austin and the Executive Director of the OneStar Foundation, the clearinghouse for all national AmeriCorps programs in Texas. With their enthusiastic support, Austin Seminary publicized this program opportunity to AmeriCorps volunteers due to initiate service in September 2011. Six AmeriCorps Service volunteers committed to be the first participants in this program and moved on site in August and September

2011. Five are working for ACE (A Community for Education) as in-school tutors, and one is working for Any Baby Can."

And then there is the reality that we can create our own understanding of who should live in these houses. Maybe you want a mixture of seminary students and AmeriCorps members. In the Trenton House one of the residents works for the state. They didn't go looking for such a person but when she came to the church and said that she wanted to participate, they went with it.

Fifteen Things to Consider As You Launch a Hospitality House

Keep it Simple, Simple

Every day disparate groups of people, often total strangers, figure out how to come together, rent a house and create a shared space. This is about creating a safe and inspiring home for young adults to live in community. It's founded on principles of thoughtfulness and simplicity.

Hospitality Houses are fundamentally about *hospitality*—they're about churches that are present, helpful and affirming of young adults who are serving the community. This is not a time to promote a member's realty business or to dump a "fixer-upper" on residents.

There are so many ways to make a Hospitality House happen! Don't be limited by existing models or limited resources. Houses of Hospitality are about innovation, not duplication.

It's About Young Adults

You'll likely find many folks in their mid-20s (or older) who are willing to live in the house. Try not to give in to that temptation. Older residents turn the house into something else. The dynamics of a group of uncertain and seeking young adults gathered to discern and live in community are unique, and will be disrupted by the constant presence of adults. Remember: Hospitality Houses are *essential* for young folks!

Residents Are Responsible for their Employment

Almost all faith based young adult volunteer programs are designed to find employment for those enrolled in their programs. Committing to help young adults find work will take a great deal of work on the church's part and is, therefore, unnecessary. Unless you have a member particularly interested in helping young adults find service organizations willing to employ them on a short-term basis, don't worry about trying! Many communities already have young adults doing service—this house is for them.

Residents Will be in the House for a Year...or Two

Houses of Hospitality are designed around a one-year residential model. There should be at least 80% turnover from year-to-year. If residents become permanent there's no room for new young adults to join the community.

Reach out to AmeriCorps ... But not Only AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps is everywhere. They hire more than 80,000 members every year. But *AmeriCorps* is not the only service organization to consider. There are a number of organizations that, like *AmeriCorps*, hire young adults and provide them with a small living stipend. Visit <http://www.faith3.org> for a list of other organizations who may have young adults working in your community.

Recruit Partner Churches

Hospitality Houses offer a great opportunity for local churches or faith organizations to work together. There's much work to be done in maintaining a thriving Hospitality House—one church can get tired of making a hot dinner every Thursday!—so the chance for cooperation across denominational affiliations is particularly exciting.

Appoint Someone in Your Church as Caretaker and Decision Maker

Someone needs to be in charge! You will need to establish one person who is able to make final decisions. Not having a clear caretaker will lead to much pain and many complications. This person will need to be a good communicator and decision-maker. Though it won't require much time day-to-day, it will be essential that the leader be available for emergencies.

Charge Rent

You should be able to generate income for House maintenance through rent. *However, rent should be low for individual residents* (Wayne suggests half of market rate for the area). If necessary, consider asking congregation members to help rehab the house. Ask folks to donate household items with which to furnish the space. Consider adding the House to your church's mission/ grounds budget.

Be Discerning in Finding the New Residents

It is impossible to know who you're considering from a few interviews and a couple of recommendations. Ask potential residents a lot of questions—questions about their experience with community living and roommates, questions about their expectations for the experience, questions about their vocation to serve. *Wishful thinking and cutting corners will lead to problems down the road.* Do not invite people to the house who seem only interested in cheap living. Be careful and aware.

Be particularly sensitive around issues of mental health. Certainly people should not be excluded because of mental health, but it should be clear that houses have limited capacity to deal effectively with mental health issues. It is critical that you be aware and proactive in dealing with potential mental health issues.

Finally, require that residents sign covenant agreements and hold residents accountable to covenant expectations. Some folks may not like covenants, but they are essential. Covenants should cover conflict management (conflict, even in the best of Houses, is inevitable). Such agreements serve as a powerful tool to glean clarity about the House's purpose and its way forward. Residents must be held accountable to house expectations as established by the covenant and the community. The integrity of the House is threatened when people don't show up (whether it be to *Vespers* or to their daily chores).

Hospitality Houses are about active engagement. If folks aren't showing up, it will have a negative impact on the entire community.

Appoint a Resident as "RA"

If there is not a paid staff person to oversee the house, a resident-leader is a must. A house leader, like a Resident Assistant in dorms, might be someone who has had previous experience in community living (or is a 2nd year resident). Leader responsibilities should be clear and the leader should report to the church member appointed as caretaker. Leadership should be incentivized—perhaps reduced or free rent depending on the level of responsibility required.

Establish a Clear Procedure for Termination

No one likes to talk about termination. However, having a clear procedure for termination is necessary. If it is clear that a resident is a "poor fit", it should not take 10 months before he or she is asked to leave. Such stress creates a strained, unhelpful environment for residents and leaders.

Programs are encouraged to be clear about the outcome of failed expectations. Problems should be addressed immediately so that resolutions can be reached quickly. If, for instance, a resident is not engaging, and the leader of the house has spoken with them about their behavior, they should be given no more than thirty days to redress the situation before they are asked to leave.

Ultimately individual houses determine who their residents will be. Be clear. Hold people accountable.

Volunteers Exploring Vocation Discernment Journal

A Self-Study Resource

for Young Adult Volunteers in Mission



By Teresa Blythe, VEV Facilitator
teresa@teresablythe.net

Congratulations on choosing to spend this year following inspiration from God to be of service to the church and the world!

Many people who make this choice tell us that they hope this service year will help them figure out what kind of life work they feel God is leading them into. That's where this guided journal comes in. We want to offer you a way to explore your vocation (a word related to "voice" and "call" that means our life's work) at a pace that is right for you.

This journal is designed to evoke from you the wisdom God is giving you around your life's work. We hope this journal will encourage you to pray and interact with God in a variety of ways. You will find a lot of introduction and explanation in this booklet with exercises and activities for journaling located in boxes. Take your time going through it. Some chapters have a lot of activities and others just a few. You can also jump around, however do make sure you cover all the material to get a balanced view.

You may be wondering *what exactly are we calling discernment?*

For our purposes, Christian spiritual discernment is defined as the sifting, sorting and "praying through" process used to make faithful choices. Many people use the term discernment to refer solely to decision making. Our definition is broader and more attuned to what Christians for centuries have been calling discernment. These principles primarily come from two Christian traditions—Ignatian (Jesuit) spirituality in the Catholic tradition, and the Quakers. In the course of the journal, we will tell you more of the history and nature of those groups. This is not to say those groups own discernment. You can find similar statements of the same principles in the Reformed Tradition, for example. However, Jesuits and Quakers were kind enough to write a lot about discernment and practice it in a fully intentional way. So much of what you find here comes from those traditions with illustrations of the same principles from *other* traditions and cultures as well.

Vocational discernment involves making a faithful choice in the direction of your work life. The exciting part is that when you learn how *you* discern large questions such as vocation, you also learn how to discern your life's path in other areas—such as relationships, community life and stewardship of the earth's resources. So, while we will talk a lot about vocational discernment, just remember *you can use these principles and processes to discern all major choices in your life!*

So grab and pen and paper (or your favorite blank journal) and let's start the adventure.

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Spiritual Director and Vocational Discernment Facilitator

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Intro to the Basic Principles of Christian Spiritual Discernment

If you've ever prayed for guidance as you make an important life choice, you've done discernment.

If you've ever listened to a gut feeling and gone with that, you've done discernment.

If you've ever made a list of the "pros" and "cons" of various options and then used that list to help you decide which path to take, you've done discernment.

If you've ever daydreamed about the kind of person you would like to become, you've done discernment.

See, you're already pretty good at this discernment stuff!

However, the kind of Christian spiritual discernment we are going to ask you to do in this journal will incorporate all of the above, not just one or two. Most of us have our preferred style of decision-making, and it may work pretty well for us. But Christian spiritual discernment asks us to use *our whole selves* in the endeavor—mind, body and spirit.

You probably have met people who prayed hard about a decision and still made a horrible choice in life. Prayer is essential to discernment, and we would never want to minimize its importance. But what if you pray hard about a path and feel it is the right one but your body, the pit of your stomach, seems to tell you "danger ahead?" Christian spiritual discernment helps you pay attention to *all* the information you receive about a choice—including that pit of your stomach.

You may have met people who made decisions solely from their gut and yet things clearly didn't work out for them. Listening to our intuition is vitally important in discernment, but it's not the only tool we have. Facts are important, too.

And you may know people who use their pro-and-con list to show them the way. But what if some of the pros or cons hold a lot of weight? Christian spiritual discernment is about taking those "weighty concerns" seriously, even if one side seems rationally to have it all over another side.

So while you may be good at your preferred style of choice-making, we want to challenge you to broaden the information you consider in discernment. This will make your decision more complex, more nuanced and, we believe, more faithful!

Exercise: Read page entitled Key Discernment Principles slowly and carefully.

Key Discernment Principles and their Corresponding Questions

By Teresa Blythe, teresa@teresablythe.net

1. Discernment hinges on a concrete life question; a choice between two or more options. *What is the question I need to discern?*
2. Christian spiritual discernment is steeped in prayer. *How am I praying about this question? What emerges as a result of my prayer?*
3. Good discernment listens to one's truest and deepest desires. *What is it that I most want in life? How do these options satisfy those "great desires?"*
4. To discern well, one needs to listen carefully to the "movements of the heart" in daily life. *What events, moments, decisions give me deep peace, gratitude, energy, love and joy? (consolation) What events, moments, decisions give me anxiety, chaos, despair, deadness? (desolation)*
5. Good discernment leaves the outcome open and in God's hands. *Can I be at peace with whatever God shows me in this discernment, regardless of outcome? If not, do I at least desire to be open to God's revelation in this matter? If the answer to that is "no," then pray for the desire to be open.*
6. One must be spiritually free (from fear, addiction, compulsion) in order to discern well. *What fears or blocks are getting in the way of exploring this question?*
7. To discern well, one needs a thorough knowledge of the options and practical considerations. *What are the facts surrounding the question? Whose lives are affected by these options? What are the pros and cons for each option?*
8. The options under consideration must be weighed using head, heart and body wisdom. *Which option feels most rational to me? Which one speaks to my heart? Which option "just feels right?" As I consider this choice, what bodily senses am I experiencing?*
9. Discernment involves imagining yourself making a choice and reflecting on the future. *If I make this choice now, how might I feel, act or be in the future? What does thinking about this choice make me feel like now?*
10. Christian spiritual discernment always considers how the option under consideration affects your family, community and people who are poor, forgotten and hurting. *How is my choice advancing God's reign in the world? How is my choice affecting people who have fewer choices than I?*
11. Discernment doesn't go on forever. At some point you must take action. *As I make the choice, do I feel a sense of lasting peace? Where do I feel alive? Blocked?*
12. Good discernment is evaluated later, as the "fruit of the Spirit" (or not!) emerges. *What has been the outcome of making this choice? Do I still feel consolation around the choice? Do I need to do more discernment?*

Find the principle that you feel you understand best and put a + mark by it. Then, find the principle you feel most challenged by and put a – sign by it. In your blank journal pages, write a few lines about "what I know" about the principle you feel most comfortable with. And write a few lines about "what I need to know" about the principle you feel least comfortable with. After you finish writing, spend a few moments in silence and then ask God to build on your strengths and whittle away at your weaknesses in discernment.

Basic Resource List

To read more about the practice of Christian spiritual discernment, the following books are recommended:

Sacred Compass: The Way of Spiritual Discernment. J. Brent Bill, Paraclete Press, 2008.

Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well. Pierre Wolf, Liguori Publications, 1993.

What God Wants for Your Life. Frederick Schmidt, HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.

50 Ways to Pray: Practices from Many Traditions and Times. Teresa Blythe, Abingdon Press, 2006.

Weeds Among the Wheat: Where Prayer and Action Meet. Thomas H. Green, Ave Maria, 1984.

Faithful Listening: Discernment in Everyday Life. Joan Mueller, Sheed & Ward, 1996.

Holy Play: The Joyful Adventure of Unleashing Your Divine Purpose. Kirk Byron Jones, Jossey Bass, 2007.

The Art of Discernment: Making Good Decisions in your World of Choices. Stefan Kiechle, Ave Maria Press, 2005.

Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life. Debra K. Farrington, Jossey-Bass, 2003.

For a free online paper on discernment from the Office of Spiritual Formation of the PCUSA, go to <http://www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/discernment.pdf>

Principle 1: The Question

Discernment hinges on a concrete life question; a choice between two or more options. *What is the question I need to discern?*

Discernment is the opposite of fuzzy thinking. For example, we as individuals would probably not have an easy time discerning something as large and abstract as “how to bring peace into the world.” A better question for us would be how does our specific choice of work contribute to a greater commitment to non-violence in society?

Chances are your question or questions will center around how you will support yourself and what kind of work is a good fit for you in the year following your year of service. You may have a few options in front of you: graduate school, travel, more voluntary service, seminary or beginning a career.

Discernment is looking concretely and comprehensively at each option in front of you and “sifting and sorting” through the facts, the feelings and the prayer insights around each option. In the following exercise, come up with your most pending discernment question.

If thinking about all your options and the pressure of choosing “the right one” makes your head spin, keep in mind that what discernment is about *at the very core* is not whether you answer your discernment question the way God prefers, and it’s not about finding what some people call “the perfect will of God,” but discernment is primarily about deepening your relationship with God.

So while we’ll talk a lot about discernment’s sifting and sorting, evaluating and weighing, listening to your consolation and desolation (those are terms to be introduced soon), what we’re really talking about is getting to know God and how God interacts in your life.

Discernment is more about noticing God in your life and in the world and then following where that Presence seems to be leading. So if the process we offer in this journal trips you up in any way, always go back to prayer and your relationship with God. Work on that and you will discern just fine.

Because God is with us in all the choices we make.

Now, back to our question.

What is, right now, your discernment question? Write it in your journal. (Don’t worry, you don’t have to stick with it if it ceases to fit. Just come up with a starter question.)

Sometimes clarifying our question takes some time. On the next page is a simple art exercise that may help you reflect and pray when words are “in the way.”

Just as writing our prayers in the form of a journal can be meaningful, drawing, painting, sculpting or using other forms of visual arts in prayer can be illuminating. Creating visual images can get us out of our usual patterns of ruminating and allow fresh new insights to emerge.

Please don't skip this exercise because you think you can't draw, paint or otherwise create in an artistic fashion. This is not about what sort of artist you are, so give your inner critic some time off. This is about opening yourself to God's loving touch through visual journaling.

The concepts for this prayer are adapted from Barbara Ganim and Susan Fox's book *Visual Journaling*.

Visual Journaling Prayer

- Place simple art supplies—markers, paper, paints, clay or collage makings--on the table in front of you.
- Settle yourself by breathing slowly in and out for at least five breaths. Allow each exhalation to naturally complete itself before inhaling. With each breath, imagine God's love and creativity flowing in and out of you.
- Think about a question that you want to take into prayer. Settle on a question, and write down a clear intention for your prayer based on this question. For example, if you have been confused about how to narrow your vocational discernment question down, write on your paper, "I intend to explore my feelings about a question I want to take into discernment." You may write on your drawing or painting paper or somewhere else. Make sure your intention for the prayer is constantly before you.
- Once again, become still and quiet. Allow your imagination to offer an image that addresses your intention. Be patient and wait on an image but don't force an image. If you have trouble at this stage, simply acknowledge your feelings to God and invite an image to appear.
- Draw, paint, sculpt or otherwise craft a representation of the image that calls to you. It does *not* have to be an actual representation. It could be an image of what the situation feels like. Don't criticize your art, and don't get caught up in making it look perfect. You may want to use your image as a catalyst to let your hands and heart produce a different image. There are no "rules" for how this is done, so let go of any anxieties and give your hands and heart freedom to create. (Allow at least 20 minutes for this portion of the exercise).
- Look at what you created. Does it surprise you? How did this visualization come to you? Was it an image in your imagination? Did you simply sense what it might look like? How is it related to your intention? What was it like to pray in this way? Where did you feel God's presence most deeply? Where did you feel most distant from God?
- Close with a short prayer of gratitude for the many ways God is present with us in prayer.

For more on visual journaling:

Visual Journaling, by Barbara Ganim & Susan Fox (Wheaton: Quest, 1999)17-28.

Principle 2: Prayer

Christian spiritual discernment is steeped in prayer.

How am I praying about this question? What emerges as a result of my prayer?

This is key. To do Christian spiritual discernment, you must be praying. If that sounds daunting, let me assure you that there are so many ways to engage God in prayer that if you are not praying it is possible that you simply have not yet found the best way for you to pray. You don't have to be good with words or say eloquent prayers to have a relationship with the Holy One. This chapter will give you some prayer practices from our two important discernment traditions, Jesuit spirituality and Quaker spirituality, to start with.

At the beginning of your YAVIM year you were given a book entitled *Sleeping with Bread*. Read this short book slowly, stopping periodically to soak its message in. The practice described in this book, *The Daily Examen*, is a foundational practice for good discernment. Many people really enjoy this active way of praying and sorting through life experiences. As a review, here is the prayer practice featured in *Sleeping with Bread*.

Introducing the Daily Examen

The motto in Ignatian spirituality is to “find God in all things.” We do that by examining our life. Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner puts it this way: “Listen to your life.” Quaker educator Parker Palmer says the same thing in his motto; “Let your life speak.” There are many ways to do this but one great way is to do a daily “examen” or examination of moments when you felt close to God and those where God felt distant.

Ignatius of Loyola was a young adult in military service in the mid-16th century, and not a very religious man. He was injured severely in the Battle of Pamplona, requiring months of recuperation at a convent. While spending many days and nights in bed with a bad leg, Ignatius passed the time by reading and daydreaming. He read books about Jesus and the life of the saints. And he daydreamed about being a valiant soldier and winning the hearts of the high society ladies. He noticed that as he read about Jesus and people like Francis of Assisi, he felt a deep desire within himself to lead a holy life. This feeling was satisfying and lasting. He also noticed that as he daydreamed about being a famous soldier and ladies' man, he enjoyed his thoughts at first but later was left with a dry and unsatisfied feeling. Ignatius began to write about what he called “the movements of his heart,” and as he did so, his spiritual life deepened. He dedicated his life to following God's desire in the world. His life-changing experience resulted in a manual designed to help people more closely follow in Christ's steps, *The Spiritual Exercises*.

At the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises* is a prayer designed to infuse the day with awareness of where you felt close to God and where you felt distant from God. Ignatius felt strongly that this prayer done daily was critical to understanding how God interacts with us as individuals. To this day, Jesuits and many others who live a discerning life say that doing the Daily Examen—if only for 10 minutes each evening—will do more to help you discover God's path for you than *any other activity*. It's worth a try, isn't it?

The Prayer of Examen

- Make yourself comfortable and set aside some quiet time for this prayer. You may want to light a candle to signify the light of Christ illuminating your day.
- Rest into silence for a few moments.
- Ask God’s Spirit to lead you through your past 24 hours.
- Review your day.
 - If you could relive any one moment, which would it be? What happened in that moment that made it so life-giving? Sit with that moment and allow it to give you life again. Offer your gratitude to God for that moment.
 - If you could go back and change any one moment in your day, which would it be? What made that moment so difficult? Sit with that moment in the light of God’s love and allow yourself to feel whatever emotion you have. Offer that moment to God for healing.
- Make a note of these two moments in your day.
- End by giving thanks to God for all the ways God has been with you—through the joy and the pain.

Note: Under “Review your day,” if, for some reason, the two questions listed above aren’t helpful for you, try one of the following alternative pairs:

- For what today are you most grateful?
- For what today are you least grateful?

- When did you feel closest to God today?
- When did you feel the most distant from God today?

- When did you feel yourself opening to God’s Spirit (love or peace)?
- When did you feel yourself blocked from God’s Spirit (love or peace)?

- What was my day’s high point?
- What was my day’s low point?

- When did you feel yourself moving toward God?
- When did you feel yourself moving away from God?

Exercise: Commit to doing this simple examen nightly during your year of service, and write down your answers to the two questions—even if all you write is a word or two. At periodic intervals, review what you have written. As you do this, you will begin to see patterns in the way you experience God. This information will help you become more aware of God’s presence and help you discern important life choices in the future.

Introducing Silent Prayer

If you’ve ever attended a Quaker worship service you probably noticed they really believe the adage “less is more” when it comes to worship. Silence is essentially a sacrament in this tradition. Being in silence, waiting and listening for a word to be placed on your heart is how many Quakers pray. If you have trouble with words or you don’t know what to say in prayer, definitely spend some quality time in solitude and silence. You may feel at first as though you aren’t really praying but remember that God already knows the desires of our heart and knows our discernment questions. Listening is far better than talking where God is concerned.

Try these two prayers, spending about 5 minutes with the first one and 10-20 minutes on the second. Do the journal exercise when you are finished praying in silence.

The “Here I Am” prayer

- Resolve to be in prayer for at least five minutes. Do not answer the phone or allow yourself to be distracted from your goal.
- Be seated and say to yourself “Here I am seated, doing nothing. I will do nothing for five minutes” (or longer, depending on the time you set for yourself).
- Begin noticing your own bodily presence. How your body feels next to the chair. How your feet feel against the floor. Relax your body. Notice what you feel inside.
- Now notice the presence of all that is around you. Say to yourself, “Here I am in the presence of the room (garden, chapel, wherever you are).” Be aware of the furniture, walls, any pets or people in the room. Just be present and silent in your environment. Relax even more.
- Now say to yourself, “Here I am in the presence of God.” Repeat silently to God, “Here I am.” Bask in the presence of the Holy One until your time goal has been reached.

Feel free to move the steps around. You may want to start by noticing God’s presence. The progression could also move from your environment to your body to God’s presence. I just find I usually need to settle my body down first in order to be still enough to be present to God.

Centering Prayer

The term “centering prayer” is sometimes used to describe any prayer that grounds us in God as we move into other prayers or prayer practices. However, for a growing number of Christians, centering prayer is a term that describes one specific prayer practice that is *apophatic*, which means wordless, imageless and wholly contemplative.

- Decide about how long you wish to stay in centering prayer. If you’re a beginner and are not accustomed to silence, you might want to start with 10 minutes. Most advocates of centering prayer recommend at least 20 minutes, with 30 minutes as a good amount to aim for on a regular basis. You may keep a clock close by to check the time or—if you think you might be tempted to focus too much on the time if you look at the clock—set an alarm. Either way, let go of concerns about the time.
- Choose a word that fits your image of God, Christ or the Holy Spirit. Any word will do. You needn’t worry about picking the best word—just something that is meaningful. This will be your sacred word for the next few minutes.
- Find a comfortable position in your chair. Feel free to shift your weight now and then to remain comfortable.
- Ask the living presence of Christ to become real to you in this time of centering prayer. Take a few moments of silence to focus on your intention.

- Say your sacred word to yourself silently. Allow your word to be the only thought in your mind. Other thoughts will come and go, but gently return to your word, silently repeating your word to yourself—not frantically, but in a relaxed way. If another thought comes into your head, simply acknowledge it and go back to your word.
- Even if you find yourself wanting to use other words to express yourself to God, go back to your word. You will have time later to say what you need to say to God in words.
- When the time you have set is up, end this centering prayer by thanking God for the gift of silence and presence. Silently say any words you longed to say to God before.

Exercise: Spend some time after the two silent prayers reflecting and journaling about the experience. What was it like for you? What was the hardest part of each prayer? What part seemed effortless? What was going on inside your mind? What feelings did it bring up? Did you feel closer to God as a result? How does awareness change as we stop what we are doing? Do you think 20 minutes (or whatever amount you chose) is a long time to spend in silence? Why or why not?

Return to silent prayer many times this year as you work through vocational discernment.

Some additional resources on prayer that you may enjoy:

50 Ways to Pray: Practices from Many Traditions and Times. Teresa Blythe, Abingdon Press, 2006.

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, InterVarsity Press, 2005.

Holy Silence: The Gift of Quaker Spirituality. J. Brent Bill, Paraclete Press, 2005

Lord, Teach us to Pray. Published by the PCUSA Office of Spiritual Formation.
www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/

Essential Spirituality: Exercises from the World's Religions to Cultivate Kindness, Love, Joy, Peace, Vision, Wisdom and Generosity. Roger Walsh, M.D., Ph.D. Wiley Press, 1999.

Principle 3: Desire

Good discernment listens to one's truest and deepest desires.

What is it that I most want in life? How do these options satisfy those "great desires?"

You will note from Ignatius' life story, desire played a large part in his discernment. Pay attention to the *great desires* in your life—those desires that transcend your individual wants and needs. What is it that you value most in the life of work? What is it that you desire?

In his book *Holy Play*, American Baptist pastor and ethics teacher Kirk Byron Jones suggests that you go even further. He believes God has given us incredible freedom to choose work that makes us most happy. He suggests asking yourself, "What would I do in life if I could do anything my heart desired?" Jones believes God is waiting with anticipation and delight to see what we choose—and that God prefers we choose based on our gifts and desires and not based on what we think is God's *perfect will* for our lives.

Does this mean we do any old thing that makes us feel good? Absolutely not. Our deepest and truest desires are those in line with what the Apostle Paul calls "Fruit of the Spirit:" love, joy, peace, kindness, patience, self-control and gentleness. Weighing our desires against this list is a valuable practice. But if you find this difficult, talk with a trusted friend who has had some experience discerning God's path in life. Ask him or her to help you sort out your desires.

Christians in the Reformed Tradition emphasize the importance of testing our desires by scripture (what does the commandment to love say about this desire?), tradition (what does our faith history say about this desire?) and in community (what does the community of faith say about this desire?). While we don't let outside influences completely sway us in our discernment, we can listen to what trusted sources have to say and use their advice as more information in our discernment process. In the end, only you and God can make the final say about your discernment.

Think about how it feels to have God say "Do anything that makes your heart sing." What would that be for you? Write what you are thinking and feeling about your heart's desire.

Now test that desire. What does the commandment of love have to say about this desire? What does our faith history have to say? What do trusted members of the faith community have to say?

Always let yourself sit with your desire for awhile. Allow God to speak in the silent prayer.

Great resources on the spirituality of desire are:

Befriending Our Desires. Philip Sheldrake, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2002.

Holy Play: The Joyful Adventure of Unleashing Your Divine Purpose. Kirk Byron Jones, Jossey Bass, 2007.

Principle 4: Movements of the Heart

To discern well, one needs to listen carefully to the *movements of the heart* in daily life. *What events, moments, decisions give me deep peace, gratitude, energy, love and joy? (consolation) What events, moments, decisions give me anxiety, chaos, despair, deadness? (desolation)*

For this principle it will be important that you have some experience with the Daily Examen. If you've been keeping an Examen journal, take a look at it now for this next reflection exercise.

Movement toward God - Consolation

Are there places in your life where you consistently experience the deep peace, gratitude, energy, love and joy that comes from being in sync with God's Spirit? If so, what were you doing at those moments? What led up to the movement of peace or joy in your heart? What were some of the contributing factors? Take a look at where you were, who you were with and what you were doing. These could be indications of a call or invitation from God to do more of that kind of activity. These could provide information to help you discern your vocation in coming months. You don't have to make any declarations right now. Just make a note of what brings you life. You can refer back to it when it comes time to make a decision.

Movement away from God - Desolation

Are there places in your life where you consistently experience anxiety, chaos, despair or deadness? If so, do these places seem to draw you closer to God? (Sometimes people do experience God deeply in the midst of a desolation experience—so it's good to ask that question). What were you doing at those moments? What led up to the anxiety, chaos, despair or deadening? What are some of the contributing factors? Take a look at where you were, who you were with and what you were doing. These could be indications of a direction that it is best you *not* take in life. Or there could be an invitation from God for reconciliation, regret, a return to God's love and light. There is always an opportunity to learn from our desolation. What is God inviting you to pay attention to here?

If you did the above reflection, then you paid close attention to the movements of your heart. Do this regularly And especially any time you have overwhelming or strong feelings in any direction or around any life event.

People frequently ask if the movements of the heart can lead a person astray. The answer is sometimes. We are all human so we are able to deceive ourselves and even others. However, God is with us even as we stray and the way to stay in relationship with God is to pay attention to the movements of our hearts. God has ways of gently bringing us back to our sacred path.

We discern the best way we know how. And we do it over time and with practice. When we take action on a choice and our heart starts out in joy and peace but becomes anxious and chaotic, then we look at the possibility that we need to make a new choice. That doesn't make us bad people—it just gives us more discernment information for the future.

Give yourself a break as you discern. It's not a foolproof method nor is it the magic formula for success. It's an ongoing process.

Take a look at the following biblical passages that seem to be addressing discernment. Find one or two that really speak to you and reflect on them in your journal.

God's desire is planted in our hearts. Deuteronomy 30. This chapter not only explains the covenant between God and Israel, but it offers some guidelines for righteous living. Choose *life* over death. The word is *in your heart to observe*. I (God) am with you through it all.

Pay attention to the little voice. Isaiah 30: 21. When you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."

The nature of Wisdom. Wisdom of Solomon (Apocryphal book) 7:22-8-1. The Wisdom of God is described in this listing of virtues. (Wisdom, in biblical wisdom literature, is personified as a woman.) Some of the virtues useful for discernment: holy, clear, humane, steadfast, free from anxiety, penetrating through all spirits.

Blessed are..... Matthew 5 – 7. The Sermon on the Mount (or Luke's Sermon on the Plain) includes excellent benchmarks for discernment. Is my choice merciful? From a pure heart? Just? Does it contribute to peace?

Fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22. Test all your choices by this list. Even though it is not an exhaustive list, it is one of the best in the Bible. Jesus frequently spoke of knowing what is holy by the "fruit produced." Love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.

Think on these things. Philippians 4: 8-9. Another list to help you make choices and test "spirits." Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, any excellence, anything worthy of praise—think about these things.

Wisdom from above. James 3:17-18. God's wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Coping with Blocks and Fears

Also essential to knowing the "movements of our heart" is to face the inevitable inner blocks and fears we have around being known by God and listening to God. We are always faced with the question, "How do we know the insight, feeling, passion, desire or leading we are experiencing is from God? When facing a spiritual dilemma or a fork in the road of our life, how do we know what is God's will for us, or what God might want us to do? Or when we have an intuition, strong feeling or we hear an inner voice, how do we know it's God?"

The short but not too comforting answer is, "we don't." The reality is that we are human and all experience of God is filtered through our humanity so we can never be completely certain that what we think is God actually is the Spirit of God. For example, some reports tell us that the people on the September 11th suicide missions thought they were doing the will of God. We are horrified at this and rightly so. Many people are deceived into mistaking their own or another's will for God. So we need checks and balances.

We've already talked about listening to our deepest and truest desire. That's one way to listen to God. But what if you think you desire a luxury car. (And maybe you do). Christian spiritual discernment challenges

you to go deeper. What is it about having a luxury car that appeals to you? What's *behind* that desire? Probably a longing for something else: maybe status in the community, a positive self image, or security.

Another way we determine what inner movements in our life are from God is to ask these questions in community. There are many ways to do this—Bible study groups, friendship circles, pastoral counseling, and spiritual direction. We are not alone in this discernment, so use the wise ones that have walked the path of discernment before you.

Testing the voices, the leadings and the desires by the “Fruit of the Spirit” as mentioned before is one of the best tests I know. Use the scriptures listed in the box on the previous page as your guideposts.

Becoming familiar with the many ways God reveals Godself to human beings will help you overcome some blocks and fears. We fear what we don't know. But getting to know God and God's ways can overcome that fear.

Below are listed some biblical examples of human encounters with God. Read through them and see which ones resonate with you. In your journal, write down what resonates with you and what doesn't. You may also want to spend time reflecting and praying about those situations which bring up blocks or fears for you.

Note in these examples the many different ways God reaches out to humans. Trust that God will find a way to lead you that fits for you.

Jacob's dream at Bethel. Genesis 28: 10-17. Jacob's first vision of God, and it includes a promise. God makes no request of Jacob, simply promises him God's presence. Are your dreams a source of information from God? What has God promised you?

Hebrew midwives feared God. Exodus 1: 8-22. Shiphrah and Puah are ordered, by the King of Egypt, to kill all the Hebrew baby boys at their births. But the two women *feared God* and not their ruler and cleverly lied their way out of a horrific situation. This is not an example of God speaking directly to a human, but of a human response to evil based on great faith in God. How does your faith determine your loyalties?

Moses' Call and Conversation with God. Exodus 3 and 4. God hears the misery of the Hebrew people and visits Moses to command him to lead his people out of slavery. Moses resists God in many ways, and at each turn, God provides for Moses what Moses needs—even when God gets angry at Moses for saying “Please God, send someone else.” How has God provided you with what you need to do what God asks of you?

Young Samuel runs to God. 1 Samuel 3 – 4:1. Samuel doesn't recognize God's voice but thinks the person he is hearing is his mentor Eli. When Eli tells Samuel it is the Lord who is speaking, Samuel eagerly listens to God, only to find out he has to relay a terrible message to Eli. How have your mentors helped you listen to God's voice? With God's help, are you able to speak the truth, even when it is hard for others to hear?

Ruth responds from deep desire and love. Ruth 1. Ruth clings to her mother-in-law Naomi and follows her to a foreign land, responding from a deep sense of commitment and love. Ruth's loyalty results in a marriage to Boaz and a child that becomes the grandfather of the future king David. Have you ever allowed such deep desire and passion to lead you in a direction that changed your life's path?

Naaman thinks God's will should be harder. 2 Kings 5:1-19. Naaman, a military commander with a terrible skin disease, is told by the prophet Elisha to go wash in the River Jordan seven times and he will be healed. Naaman wanted more theatrics or a task more substantial. His servants say to him “if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?” Naaman sees their point and does as Elisha commanded, and he is healed. Have you ever stumbled in following God, or been surprised because you expected that what God would ask of you would be more difficult than it turned out to be?

The Call of the Prophets of Israel. Check any of the prophetic books in the Hebrew scriptures and you will find “call stories” that fit a general description: God appears unmistakably to the person and says “Thus said the Lord” along with a message for a specific person or nation. It is frequently a message of woe, which puts the prophet in physical danger. He then has to defend against the question, “how do we know God has uttered this message?” The prophet demures or resists what God asks of him. Many times a supernatural event occurs to reassure him (see Moses’ story above). This event helps the prophet build a case so that when he approaches the powers-that-be he can say something like, “of course this word is from God. Do you think I would be masochistic enough to come up with this on my own? It is not I who speaks, but I am only a representative of the Lord.” The prophet reluctantly does what God commands and takes his lumps. He is only recognized as a prophet if what he proclaims comes to pass. So he has a time of anxiety and waiting. How is it that *you* know God is giving you a task? Do you react like the prophets? Which prophet’s story do you feel most drawn to? Does it fit your own?

Jesus calls Levi. Mark 2:17-17. Much like Simon, Andrew, James and John, Jesus merely says to Levi (the tax collector) “follow me” and Levi gets up and follows Jesus. The scandal of the story is that Jesus called a tax collector to be one of his followers—a profession reviled and hated by most people. Are you surprised when God chooses you for a task even though it may seem you are not quite a “fit” for that task? How eagerly do you get up and follow?

For more reading on consolation and desolation check out:

Weeds Among the Wheat: Where Prayer and Action Meet. Thomas H. Green, Ave Maria, 1984.

Faithful Listening: Discernment in Everyday Life. Joan Mueller, Sheed & Ward, 1996.

Good resources for working through blocks and fears around our image of God include:

If God is Love: Rediscovering Grace in an Ungracious World. Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, HarperSanFrancisco, 2004.

Good Goats: Healing our Image of God. Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn, Paulist Press, 1994.

Principle 5: Holy Indifference

Good discernment leaves the outcome open and in God's hands. *Can I be at peace with whatever God shows me in this discernment, regardless of outcome? If not, do I at least desire to be open to God's revelation in this matter? If the answer to that is "no," then pray for the desire to be open.*

Think of a time you wanted something so badly you could not even think about an outcome other than exactly what you desired. Did your desired outcome become reality? Sometimes getting what we want helps us realize that we don't always know what's best for us. Sometimes we desire something so badly that considering less-than-positive outcomes feels wrong. A friend whose daughter was having trouble with a pregnancy once said "I know I'm supposed to pray for God's will in this matter and then let it go but all I can really pray for is the health of those babies." She was having a hard time leaving the outcome up to God, which is understandable.

Though difficult, it is critical to discernment that we are at least *somewhat* open to all the options in front of us so that we don't close ourselves off to the unknown. There may be a really great path for us that we haven't yet considered and we need to be ready to consider it when God makes us aware of it.

A good example of this is found in the life of Francis of Assisi (13th century). After a long illness and imprisonment, Francis (in his 20's) stumbled into a chapel at San Damiano that was run down and badly in need of repair. He stopped to pray and as he contemplated the cross he heard God saying to him "Francis, repair my church." Francis took God literally and began to clean and fix up the small chapel. Years later as he lived as an itinerant beggar-preacher, with hundreds of people joining him in his ministry, he realized that call was much larger than scrubbing the floor of the chapel. He was called to literally transform the church of his time, helping it turn its focus away from power and privilege toward serving "the least of these brothers and sisters." Francis walked a path of openness.

Ignatius of Loyola, who was a big fan of Francis some 300 years later, made the principle of being open to wherever God leads key to his *Spiritual Exercises* and to the culture of the Jesuit order. He calls it "holy indifference," which doesn't mean you don't care which choice you make but that you are open to wherever the Spirit may lead you in desire, passion and understanding. This openness prevents you from being so attached to worldly things—health, power, money and popularity—that you put them before your relationship with God.

Ignatius knew how hard this was, so he taught that if you could not will yourself to be open to any outcome then at least you could pray that God might grant you the grace to have this "holy indifference." Praying for openness is one of the best ways to open yourself to God.

What is your experience with what Ignatius calls "holy indifference?" Are you open to a number of outcomes in your vocational discernment this year? Name the options you are considering and rate them according to your openness to the option.

Read and reflect on the following prayer of Ignatius:

"On our part we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest; desiring and choosing only that which is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created."

What feelings does this prayer bring up for you? To what end do you believe you are created? What is your prayer after reading Ignatius' prayer?

Keeping an openness to wherever the Spirit leads may mean looking at our “mistakes” differently.

If available, watch the film *Pollack* and pay close attention to the scene in which the artist has a breakthrough moment in his painting—all a result of spilling some paint accidentally on the floor. Jackson Pollack had hit a stuck place in his career as an artist when this happened. The spill led to a creative burst that transformed his career. His wife, upon seeing the new creation declared, “Pollack, you’ve cracked this thing wide open.”

Watch for places in your YAV experience that “crack things wide open” for you. They may at first be what you call a mistake. Where have things been cracked open for you lately?

Holy indifference is discussed in any of the books on discernment that you read. See the list on page 4.

Principle 6: Inner Freedom

One must be spiritually free (from fear, addiction, compulsion) in order to discern well. *What gets in the way of exploring my discernment question?*

People in Alcoholics Anonymous are told to refrain from entering romantic relationships for at least a year after they first become sober. People who are depressed are told not to make major decisions until their depression lifts. Today we know from modern psychology that addictions and addictive behavior clouds our decision-making capacity.

Our spiritual heritage tells us the same thing. In order to discern well, we need to be relatively free from outside influences and inner compulsions to see clearly. So if we are addicted to a substance or if we are constantly fearful, anxious and in the middle of an emotional storm, we may have a great deal of trouble discerning God's desire for our lives very well. That is not to say it can't be done. It's just that the blocks are large and powerful.

We need inner freedom to be in a mature relationship with God. And we need it for discernment.

Some examples of the *lack* of inner freedom might be

- Being so afraid of God that you don't even want to know what God desires for you.
- Allowing parents or authority figures to dictate how you will live their life, long after you have become an adult.
- Not feeling whole or loved without being in a romantic relationship.
- Addiction to drugs or alcohol
- A depression that lasts many weeks.
- Living with irrational compulsions or fears (such as phobias) that will not go away.

Don't give up on discernment if you find yourself lacking in inner freedom. But if you have never really felt safe and inwardly free then it would be best that—before you do a long discernment about vocation or other matters—you check in with a counselor who can help you get to know what inner freedom feels like. Your site coordinator will be able to help you find a counselor with experience in helping you overcome these psychological barriers.

Some signs of the *presence* of inner freedom might be

- Loving God and trusting that God's desire for you is what is really best for you and what will make you happy in the long run.
- An openness to a variety of outcomes and knowing that no matter what the outcome, you and God will get through it together.
- Feeling comfortable in your skin. Treating yourself with care.
- Trusting that you will make good choices.
- An ability to stop worrisome thoughts when they crop up.
- A desire to pray and sit and just be with God

Imagine a time in your past when you felt truly free inside yourself. What were you doing? Who were you with? See, hear, taste and feel that experience again in your imagination.

Knowing what inner freedom feels like, test a choice that you are facing right now against it. What decision feels most like that inner freedom?

Whenever you need to check yourself for how free you are feeling, remember that initial time of freedom. Go back to it and pray with it. Use it in your discernment.

Many times our inner freedom is blocked by interpersonal conflicts. If you find your discernment is stalled because of difficult situations at work, in your house or in relationships stop and take time to address the conflict.

Conflict between people is not bad or wrong—it's the price we pay for being human. It can be a starting point for a lot of growth, which is a good thing. So if you avoid conflict because you think it's unchristian or sinful, you might want to change the way you see it so that you can address it head on.

The following is a useful process for addressing interpersonal conflict. It comes from the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center (www.LMpeacecenter.org), an organization devoted to conflict transformation.

- Gather those in disagreement together. Pray for a mutually satisfactory solution.
- Each person shares their story as the others listen without responding. When one person has finished sharing, everyone else summarizes what they heard and checks out what has been heard to make sure the person who shared was heard. Then the next person shares in the same manner. Each time one person ends their sharing the listening parties summarize what they have heard. This takes time but is worth it because this is where the understanding takes place. *It is important that during this step everyone suspend judgments, avoid labeling or name calling and act in a non-defensive way.*
- After everyone has shared, a note-taker is designated to document the following tasks.
 - The group will identify *issues, needs and interests* of all parties (rather than taking positions).
 - Generate a variety of options for meeting each parties' needs (rather than defending one's own way).
 - Evaluate options by how they meet the needs and satisfy the interests of all sides (not one side "winning").
 - Work out a joint solution so that both sides gain, grow and win.
 - Cooperate with the emerging agreement.
 - Reward one another for each step forward.

Excellent resources for conflict transformation include:

“Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love: Commitments for Christians in Times of Disagreement,” flyer from the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center, www.LMpeacecenter.org

“Seeking to be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians during times of disagreement,” free publication found at <http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/guidelines.pdf>

Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Puddledancer Press, 2005.

Principle 7: Practical Considerations

To discern well, one needs a thorough knowledge of the options and practical considerations. *What are the facts surrounding the question? Whose lives are affected by these options? What are the pros and cons for each option?*

Never let it be said that Christian spiritual discernment is simply about praying, asking for guidance and then waiting for a voice to tell you what to do. A large part of discernment is practical—gathering all the available facts and weighing the real-world considerations. Without the facts we would make a choice blindly. When certain facts change our discernment or choice may change as well. We may be leaning one way and then have a new fact or insight introduced that changes everything.

In this phase we marry our head with our heart and do the old fashioned “pros and cons” list. Brainstorm with your head and then spend time evaluating with your heart. Measure each pro and con because not all are weighted equally. For example, if I were offered an exciting career opportunity in Dallas but my husband has a job he loves in Tucson I might write down “location” as a con, and then put a mark by it because the fact that my husband would have to find a new job feels pretty weighty. It’s certainly more of a consideration for me than the hours or the salary.

You can make this list out any way you like. If you have more than one vocational option in front of you, you may want to consider them one at a time. I like using index cards and writing the option at the top in bold letters, then putting the pros on one side and the cons on the other, weighting them and then spreading the cards out in front of me as I pray about each option. Then if I want to eliminate an option I simply remove the card and continue the prayer and discernment about the remaining cards. I have also used this with other people to help them sort through the practical consideration of their discernment.

When you consider practical matters, keep in mind the importance of relationships, your gifts and skills and your deep desires. You might give more weight to a “pro” that highlights your special talents. You might give extra weight to a “con” that pulls you farther away from a relationship that is central to your life.

Ignatius also recommends that you place weight upon considerations that promote social justice. If an option would be beneficial to people who are poor, oppressed or forgotten in some way you may want to give it extra weight. When considered with all the other “pros and cons” this will help you make a choice that, as Frederick Buechner puts it, is where “your deep gladness and the world’s deep need meets.”

Whenever you face a roadblock in your discernment, always ask yourself if you have all the facts you need to make the decision. You may need to do more research, another interview or talk with someone who knows the situation better than you. Never underestimate the power of getting all the facts.

- Gather a note pad and some index cards. On the notepad, brainstorm information about your vocational choices. Don’t censor yourself, just write down what comes to mind easily.
- On your index cards, write each option as a heading on a card. Take them one at a time and make a list of pros and cons for each card. Put stars or marks by the ones that have more weight on them.
- Spread your cards out in front of you. Spend time in silence, praying with each card. Ask God for guidance in the choices. Which cards are you more drawn to? Spend more time with them. You may find one card standing out from the rest. Pray with this card. Keep your cards around and do this another day to see if anything new emerges.

It may be helpful to know how some other people have done their important discernments, weighing the practical matters. Look at the stories in the next box and see which ones appeal to you. In your journal reflect on how each person weighed the practical considerations as well as reaching out to God.

“Thank you God for that thought!”

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), born into slavery with the name Isabella and sold three times as a slave, made her escape with one daughter (leaving three other children of hers behind) in 1850 just a few months before her state of New York emancipated slaves born two years after her birthday. She gave herself the name of Sojourner Truth at age 46 and in her 50’s became a fiery speaker for civil and women’s rights. A Christian, Sojourner tells the story of her escape, wondering out loud to God, “How can I get away?” She told God she was afraid to leave in the night and if she left by daylight everyone could see her, so she was in a bind. As she prayed, the thought came to her that she could leave just before the day dawned and get out before people were “much astir.” “Yes,” she said, fervently, “that’s a good thought! Thank you, God for *that* thought!” So, receiving it as coming directly from God, she acted on it and stepped away from Master Dumont’s house, her infant on one arm and her wardrobe on the other. —from *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* can be found online at www.sojournertruth.org

“I can’t face this alone.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) was only 25 years old at the time of the Montgomery bus boycott. He was an associate pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist church when he was first asked to take part in the boycott. At first, he resisted getting involved but once involved he was a target of angry, threatening phone calls. In his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, he talks about praying at the end of a bad day. He had gone to bed late and was about to doze off when he got one of these phone calls. After he hung up, he could not sleep. He got up, walked the floor and prayed. He was considering giving up and getting out of the civil rights movement. King said to God: “I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.” In that moment, King says, he knew the Divine presence in a way he had never before experienced it. It was a turning point in his life.

“Two words formed in my mind”

Andrae Crouch (1942 -) is a gospel music “hall of famer” with seven Grammy awards to his name. He’s also pastor of the New Christ Memorial Church of God in Christ in San Fernando, CA. Crouch has had many experiences where he felt God seemed to speak to him in a straightforward manner. One striking example was when he was a senior in college. He fell deeply in love with a young woman who moved to Boston and he felt desperate to follow her there. He prayed for guidance and says “As I sat on my bed with eyes shut tight, two words formed instantly in my brain: ‘Don’t go.’” This was not the answer he wanted so he repeated the request, asking God to guide him. Again the words formed in his mind, “Don’t go.” He wondered if this was, in fact from God. He went to Boston anyway. A few days later, he left, heartbroken. His girlfriend had broken up with him and asked him to leave. He says God had guided him in two ways—by telling him not to go; but also by confirming that it was God’s voice when he verified it by going.

Principle 8: Mind, Body, Spirit

The options under consideration must be weighed using head, heart and body wisdom. *Which option feels most rational to me? Which one speaks to my heart? Which option “just feels right?” As I consider this choice, what bodily senses am I experiencing?*

We come to discernment as whole persons. And we use all of who we are to discern. The last principle was pretty much the “head work” although the heart played a part in weighing the pros and cons. But now we must also listen to our intuition and our bodies. You may want to spend more time on this section, doing the exercises over for several days. The more you involve your whole self the better you will begin to listen to God’s Spirit as it leads you.

What do you do when your gut seems to sound an alert that something is not right in the path you are taking? Think about a time when that happened. Did you listen to your gut? Did you consider it as part of the information gathering phase of discernment?

In this exercise we will ask you to do just that.

Grab your journal and pen.

Let go of any nagging thoughts or worries.

Show your “internal censor” the door! No critics allowed in this exercise.

Allow your body to relax as completely as you can. Breathe deeply and silently say the word “relax” or “peace.” If you are familiar with a way to relax, such as progressively moving from head to toe and letting go of tension, do that now.

Ask God to be present in this intuition exercise.

Imagine the wisest person you know has come to visit you. See this person in your mind’s eye. He or she doesn’t have to be physically present in your life. It could be someone who has died; a biblical character or a person you have never met before now.

Ask this person a question regarding your vocational discernment. Something that has been on your heart. Write the question down.

Be in silence. Allow your imagination to roll. Listen carefully to what this wise person has to say to you.

Write down the answer. Don’t think too hard about it. Let the thoughts flow.

When you finish with the first question, ask another question.

Do this for 20 minutes or longer, letting the questions and answers flow.

Now that you have exercised your intuition, we turn our attention to the body. This focusing exercise will help you get in touch with the wisdom that your body is holding. This exercise is an adaptation of an exercise used by psychologists to help people get in touch with their body’s wisdom. It’s also an excellent spiritual practice. It may seem unusual at first to talk to a “felt sense” or ask your body a question but once you get the hang of it, it’s a very useful exercise in discernment. Release all judgment about how awkward you may feel. Just let it happen. Some people are more in tune with their bodies than others. If this doesn’t provide you with a lot of information at first, don’t despair. Just try it again and again. With practice you will learn to listen to your body more carefully.

Sit comfortably in a chair. Ask God to be present in this focusing exercise.

Select a vocational question that you have a strong emotion around. Name the emotion or feeling. (An example might be “fear of starting seminary”)

Ask your body where it wants you to go with this emotion. What part of your body is drawing your attention?

Pose the question to that part of the body. What is the bodily sense, sensation or feeling in that part of the body? Is there an image that emerges?

Can you name the felt sense? (tight stomach, knot in the neck, dull headache, etc.)

Ask your body, “what gets you so _____ (emotion)?” For example “what gets you so fearful?”

Sit in silence and nonjudgment about the answer you receive from your body’s wisdom.

Now ask your body what would make it feel better. Sit in silence as your body wisdom takes its time answering.

Thank your body wisdom for this time.

Thank God for being in your body wisdom.

Another good way to use your body in discernment is to walk a labyrinth with your vocational discernment question.

As you enter the labyrinth, let go of all that stands in the way of you and God’s desire for your life. The path to the center of the labyrinth is the way of “holy indifference” or letting go of the outcome. While in the center, pray for God’s light to provide clarity on your question. Sit in silence, simply listening. The walk away from the center out to the world is symbolic of how you live out God’s desire in the world. Ponder all the ways you might live out what you felt God was prompting you in the center of the labyrinth. If you did not feel any insight or prompting, simply rest in the silence. God responds in God’s time, not ours.

Here is a body-awakening prayer that can get you “out of your head” and into your connection with nature.

Lectio in Nature

- Become present to your surroundings in nature by sitting in silence for a few moments. Ask God to address you in this prayer through nature.
- Look around you. Take some time to walk around and survey the piece of creation which surrounds you. As you do this, notice when something draws your attention. It could be something attractive or something that repulses or upsets you. Just look for something that has some energy for you. As you gaze upon it, imagine God also gazing upon it.
- Continue to be with this part of nature that has drawn your attention. Think about what you know about this part of nature. What are the connections you might make with your life right now? Be aware of your feelings as well as your thoughts. What is God saying to you in this encounter with nature?
- Express yourself in some way to God. Respond to God’s gift in nature in some way.
- Rest with God in what you notice and reflect upon how that awareness speaks to your life. Open your whole self to God by moving beyond words and images. Bask in what God has done in you during this prayer. Bask in how your human nature has communed with the rest of nature and also with God.

Principle 9: Imagination

Discernment involves imagining yourself making a choice and reflecting on the future. *If I make this choice now, how might I feel, act or be in the future? What does thinking about this choice make me feel like now?*

No one can predict the future. And we certainly have to live in the present. But projecting into the future is a great way to gauge how we are feeling about a decision we are facing. This section will feature tests that can help you make a choice. They come from Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* but you may find some of them familiar. Before doing these tests, isolate some of your options that you have been discerning. Choose one or two. You can always put more to the test later.

The Rocking Chair Test

Imagine you are very old and looking back on your life and on the choice you are now considering. Imagine you made one of the choices. How was it for you? Did you feel it was a good choice? What did it lead to? Did you wish you had made a different choice? Now do the same test with your second choice. Ask the same questions.

What insight did this test provide you?

The Best Friend Test

Imagine your best friend came to you facing the exact same choices that you are facing. He or she is asking you to help them decide. What do you tell them? How do you help them evaluate their choice? What advice would you give?

What insight did this test provide you?

The Judgment Day Test

Imagine it is judgment day and you are standing before the Holy One (you may imagine God, Jesus or a host of characters). You are there to explain to the Holy One the decision you made and why you made it. Which choice would you rather explain to God? Why? What do you imagine God saying to you about these choices?

What insight did this test provide you?

Principle 10: Looking outward

Christian spiritual discernment always considers how the option under consideration affects your family, community and people who are poor, forgotten or hurting. *How is my choice advancing God's reign in the world? How is my choice affecting people who have fewer choices than I?*

As young adult volunteers in mission you are keenly aware of the systems and structures that affect people's lives on a daily basis. Every choice we make has consequences for many other people. So even if we wanted to be rugged individualists who lived only for ourselves, there would be no way in reality to do so.

Christian spiritual discernment is not only an inward look at our deepest desires and motivations. It is also an outward look at how the choices we make affect others. While we don't drive ourselves into the ground to be of service, we do need to find work that is meaningful, life-giving and peaceful for us and for everyone else, too. It's the essence of Jesus' command to love God with our whole being and love others as ourselves. Needless to say, it's a balancing act and it's complex. That's why discernment is so helpful.

We keep referring to Frederick Buechner's motto, which is used a lot to help young adults discern their call from God. He says that *God's call is where our deepest gladness meets the world's deep need.*

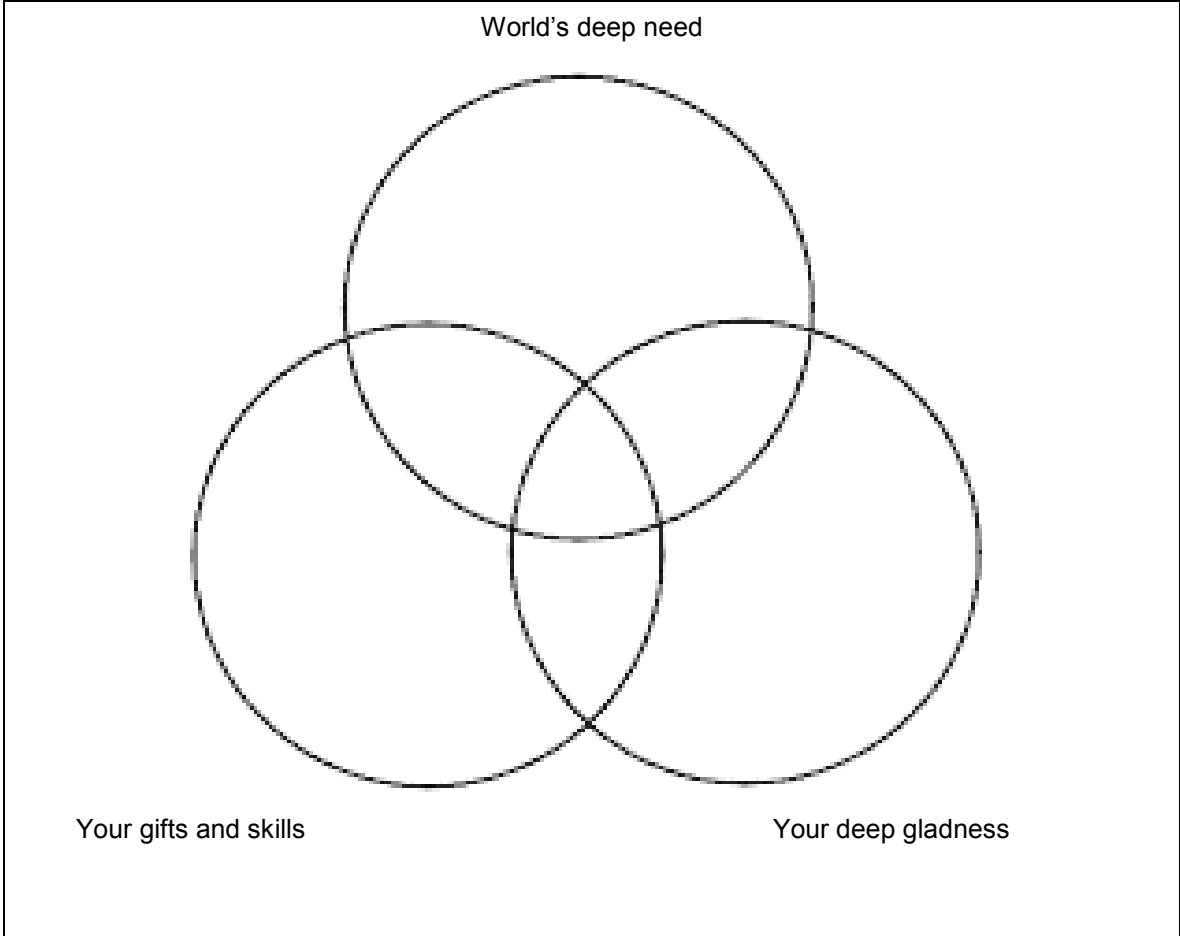
In our society we are pretty good at looking at what makes us glad, joyful, fulfilled. It is a bit harder to look honestly at the world's deep need.

Watch the film *Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story*. Notice her transformation from a reporter to a person dedicated to helping New York City's poor, lonely and forgotten residents. How did she find her call? What was her deep gladness? How did she respond to the world's deep need? What need calls out to you as you do your work at your site placements this year?

This next exercise may help you explore your gifts, your desires and the world's need.

In the diagram on the next page, write some words near each circle that represent what you have noticed about your gifts and skills, your deep gladness and the world's deep need. The triangular area in the middle is the "sweet spot" where all three converge.

Reflect on that "sweet spot" and where that might be for you vocationally. Write down any insights you have.



Principle 11: Taking action

Discernment doesn't go on forever. At some point you must take action. *As I make the choice, do I feel a sense of lasting peace? Where do I feel alive and open to God's leading? Where do I feel stifled or blocked?*

Are you ready to take the leap and make the choice? The good news is that you can do it tentatively and test it out before you declare it to the world. You might want to journal about this.

Make a preliminary choice. Live with it for a week or so. Imagine yourself living it out. Try it on for size. At the end of a week (or whatever time period you give yourself) do an Examen and see what you discover. Are you feeling a sense of peace about the choice? What have been the high points of the week? What have been the low points? Where have you felt God's leading? Where have you felt blocked? How are you feeling about making this choice more permanent?

I hope by now you are seeing the healthy fruit of doing a daily or weekly Examen as a prayer practice. The more you notice where God is alive and active in your life the more you will get a feel for where God is leading. Are you ready to make your preliminary choice more lasting? You may want to put another option to the week long trial period with the Examen.

At some point you have to make a choice. Hopefully by this time you are feeling more confident about your skills and gift of discernment. The best news of all is that we don't have to worry about making a mistake. Discernment isn't about making perfect choices. It's about being faithful. So keep praying and discerning.

There is a wonderful story about Lutheran theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. At the height of the Nazi takeover of his home country of Germany his friends convinced him to flee to New York and work at Union Theological Seminary rather than be hunted down for his opposition to Hitler. He heeded their advice and went to New York. But he says that decision didn't end up feeling right to him. He read a passage in Isaiah about how the righteous don't flee tribulation and that convinced him to take the last available boat out of New York back to Germany where he was, in fact, imprisoned and executed for his role in a plot to assassinate Hitler. So if a great Christian theologian and person of faith like Bonhoeffer can "re-discern" based on his intuition and leadings from God, so can we.

Watch the 93 minute documentary entitled *Bonhoeffer* by Journey Films available online or at your local video store. It tells the whole story of his life and legacy.

As you make your choice, think about how your site placement this year shaped and formed you in vocational discernment. What did you learn about yourself? Others? The population you were serving? What did you learn about how God responds to social inequities? What did you learn about compassion?

Write a short note of gratitude to your site placement supervisor about what you learned and how the site helped you discover your call.

Principle 12: Evaluating my choice

Good discernment is evaluated later, as the “fruit of the Spirit (or not)” emerges. *What has been the outcome of making this choice? Do I still feel consolation around the choice? Do I need to do more discernment?*

As the story about Bonhoeffer returning to Germany illustrates, we sometimes don’t have all the information we need to make a good discernment until after we have made the leap of faith and taken action. A wise older Quaker woman once said “People always talk about how God opens doors. But I have only ever seen the door from the back side—after it’s been closed or I’ve already walked through it.” That is so true. We do our very best discernment in hindsight. Another reason why the Ignatian Examen is one of the best regular prayer practices to engage in. Checking back on your written examens will help you see where those doors have opened or closed behind you.

Never despair over a discernment choice that needs more work. Discernment is a way of life, not a one-shot problem-solving exercise.

In a few months after you have made your choice and lived with it awhile, keep doing your daily examen. You may want to do a special Examen about the choice you made. Notice the lasting fruits. If they are love, joy, peace, patience and so forth then rejoice and thank God for the gift of discernment. If they are chaos, anxiety, confusion and the kind of suffering that wears you down rather than making you feel “the good kind of tired” then thank God for the new information. And repeat the process of discernment until you receive new insight. Sometimes it may be a matter of sticking with it until the gifts in the work emerge. Or it may be that you need to move on. You will only know after doing your examen and prayer work.

I keep a simple template in my mind that helps me remember discernment. It goes something like this:

1. Become aware of God’s presence
2. Ask what that Presence is inviting me to do
3. Discern (sift and sort through inward and outward information)
4. Take action
5. Repeat steps 1 – 4

Many people feel that they need help along the way with discernment. If you feel that way, look for a spiritual director in your area. They are usually reasonably priced (some are even free) and have training in discernment. Go to www.sdiworld.org and use the “seek and find” guide to find a spiritual director in your area.

Meet with a spiritual director. Tell him or her your spiritual journey and especially highlight important experiences of God in your life.

Share your experience with vocational discernment. Ask this person, “Where do you see evidence of the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ in my life?”

Rule of Life

For me, discernment has become a part of my “rule of life.” People of prayer frequently have intentional practices and attitudes that they cultivate. Based on St. Benedict’s famous “Rule” for his order, we call these “Rules for Prayer.” Rule doesn’t mean mandatory or obligatory. It’s an intention for finding space for God.

Many of these people didn’t call what they developed a “rule.” But in William Paulsell’s book *Rules for Prayer*, he lists a few that he created based on these people’s writings. I invite you to read these over to get some ideas for your own rule.

Calvin’s “Rule”

1. Pray with great reverence, with hearts free of “carnal cares and thoughts.”
2. Pray with an awareness of our own weaknesses and insufficiencies, yet also with a burning desire.
3. Give up all thoughts of our won glory and self-assurance and plead for the forgiveness of sins.
4. Pray with the certain hope that our prayers will be answered.
5. Pray first thing in the morning, before beginning daily work, when we sit down for a meal, when we have eaten, and when we go to bed at night.

Anthony Bloom – Orthodox Bishop

1. Realize our poverty; that we keep nothing forever.
2. Everything we have is a sign of the love of God.
3. We have been willed into existence by God.
4. Avoid images of God.
5. Understand that God is to be found within us.
6. Pray spontaneously, biblical prayers that others have prayed before, and pray the Jesus Prayer (Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon us)

Dorothy Day – 20th Century Advocate for the Poor

1. Practice the presence of God; be aware of God’s presence.
2. Attend eucharist daily.
3. Read the Bible regularly.
4. Look for Christ’s presence in the poor.
5. Pray morning and evening, using the psalms.
6. Keep a journal.
7. Pray the Lord’s Prayer three times a day.
8. Use the Jesus Prayer

Dom Helder Camara – Brazilian Catholic Bishop and Advocate for the Poor

1. Pray when others are asleep. (For him it was 2 – 4am).
2. Listen for the voice of God in the poor.
3. See Christ in other people, especially those who suffer.
4. Be prepared to give up power, privilege and prosperity.
5. Pray the breviary (Catholic liturgical book containing prayers, liturgies and notations for daily prayer) regularly.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Lutheran theologian and Holocaust martyr

1. Read the Bible morning and evening.
2. Pray the psalms daily.

3. Recite hymns
4. Maintain a daily routine rather than giving in to weakness which causes a loss of power
5. Include thanksgiving prayers, even in the worst situation. It enables us to look beyond the present moment.
6. Meditate on the life, teachings, suffering and death of Jesus.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. Meditate daily on the life and teachings of Jesus
2. Live in the manner of love
3. Pray daily to be used by God
4. Sacrifice personal wishes
5. Perform regular service for others
6. Stay in good bodily and spiritual health
7. Pray for the oppressor

The Rule of St. Benedict

1. Use the tools of good works (10 commandments, Golden Rule, renounce the self, love fasting, look after the poor, love enemies and endure persecution, fear the day of judgment, listen to holy reading, pray, confess sins, avoid gratifying the flesh, settle disputes before the day ends, and never lose hope in the mercy of God.)
2. Practice hospitality.
3. Read the Bible and the church fathers and mothers.
4. Develop a rhythm of prayer and work
5. Treat each other as Christ.

The Rule of Taize

1. Practice self control and denial.
2. Be a sign of joy and love to others
3. Love the dispossessed and those suffering injustice
4. Have a zeal for the unity of the church
5. Practice common prayer three times a day
6. Practice personal prayer
7. Have interior silence
8. Practice simplicity of life
9. Practice mercy and avoid judgment

To develop your own rule think about these three things.

How do I want to be in prayer daily? (prayer)

What practices will I use to allow God to form me spiritually? (study)

How will I live out my call as a Christian in a hurting world? (action)

Feel free to add anything you want to your list. Many people who use a “rule of life” review it each year as they grow and change.

The Volunteers Exploring Vocation

Facilitator's Resource book

for leaders in the Young Adult Volunteers in Mission
program of the PCUSA



Prepared by Teresa Blythe, Facilitator of VEV program
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Congratulations on answering the call to facilitating vocational discernment sessions with Young Adult Volunteers in Mission (YAVIM) in the upcoming months. We've developed a 16-session program that covers a lot of ground, primarily principles found in a wide variety of writings about Christian Spiritual Discernment.

What are we calling discernment?

For our purposes, Christian spiritual discernment is defined as the sifting, sorting and “praying through” process that is used to make faithful choices. Many people use the term discernment to refer solely to decision making. Our definition is broader and more attuned to what Christians for centuries have been calling discernment. These principles primarily come from two Christian traditions—Ignatian spirituality in the Catholic tradition, and Quakers. That is not to say those groups “own” discernment. You can find similar statements of the same principles in the Reformed Tradition, for example. However, Jesuits and Quakers were kind enough to write a lot about discernment and practice it in an intentional way. So much of what you find here comes from those traditions with illustrations of the same principles from *other* traditions and cultures thrown in as well.

Discernment—especially *vocational* discernment—is a spiritual practice highly valued by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In the latest GAC 2007-2008 Mission Work Plan (Objectives, Outcomes and Funded Work), this “Vocation Objective” is stated:

Equip Presbyteries and congregations to help members discern that their vocation is a call from God to Christian witness in society and the church.

Successful outcomes for this goal include:

- More Presbyterians who understand and live out their vocation, whatever it may be, as a sacred call from God
- More Presbyterians discerning a call to leadership in the church, particularly ministers of word and sacrament serving congregations.

Further, this document states that “Work aligned here will continue a strong emphasis on leadership development, *especially of young adults.*” (emphasis added) You can see that by offering vocational discernment to YAVIM, we are fulfilling an important task for the PCUSA.

Touch on all themes

The sessions presented here focus on themes important to vocational discernment. There is a sense of progression, although many parts here are interchangeable. It is important that you do the themes in Sessions 1 and 2 first. They set the tone for the volunteer listening to their “great desires,” understanding spiritual freedom and letting go of prescribed outcomes. Those three tenets of discernment are usually presented first because they are bedrocks for the others. Please touch on all themes in some fashion throughout the year because one of the values of discernment in this style is that a person puts their choice to the test in a number of different ways rather than relying upon any one (such as gut instinct, practical considerations or a vision from a prayer experience).

Do it Your Way

You have been chosen because you have some experience in walking with others as they discern where God is leading. For that reason, you may have resources of your own that you like better than what is presented here. Please, use them! These are *suggestions*, not a prescribed outline that has to be followed. We do believe that what is presented here is sound and workable. We spent an entire year using the curriculum with YAVIM in Tucson and everyone involved had a great experience. So if you don't have resources that you like better, please use this one!

In each session, we have included goals and some ways for you to reach those goals. Much of this curriculum is based on shared dialogue among volunteers. You will see a lot of discussion questions that you can offer to get the sharing going. There are also a lot of prayer and reflection exercises. At times, you will want to use media clips and handouts suggested. We have found that volunteers respond very well to media clips, as they grew up in a media-saturated culture. Even those who “never watch TV” found great meaning in the film clips we used.

We suggest opening each session with a prayer, using a variety of styles so volunteers can explore and experiment to find their personal prayer style over the course of a year. You may also want to develop a closing activity for each session. Perhaps something as simple as asking, “What—of all that we have discussed in this session—do you want to take away and remember?”

Some sites will do these sessions within the context of retreats and others may hold regular sessions. It’s entirely up to you and your site coordinator. A combination of the two is what we do in Tucson. Some themes may also lend themselves to approaching in the one-on-one sessions you have with individual volunteers. For example, we in Tucson used one-on-one meetings for volunteers to talk about the practical considerations, and it worked very well. When it comes to making important vocational choices, some volunteers will want to talk with you in private before revealing a lot in the group sessions, so if you can make yourself available to the volunteers for one-on-one sessions, everyone benefits.

Be as creative as you want to be in approaching vocational discernment with your volunteers. Make this year work for you and your site.

Cross Cultural Considerations

Care has been taken to incorporate stories and examples of discernment that come from women, minorities and people who work extensively with those who are poor. Much more could be added, so please look for examples of good discernment from all walks of life (and share them with us!). Pay close attention to the populations that your YAVIM are working with and find examples of prayer experiences and discernment from those cultures. As you share those with us, we will continue to develop a curriculum that speaks across racial and ethnic lines.

Support

You are not alone in facilitating these VEV discussions with YAVIM. There are facilitators at many sites. Part of my job is to support you as facilitators, since I wrote this curriculum and used much of it in the 2005-2006 year. So feel free to call me—I work out of my home---at 520-290-6734 or e-mail me at tblythe@jps.net. I hope we can develop an e-mail listing where we share ideas and exercises that work well for us.

Connection with VEV Discernment Journal: A Self-Study Resource for YAVs

Each YAV will receive a discernment journal, a self-study resource that is connected by themes to this curriculum. The self-study resource is organized along the Principles of Discernment (see page 28 of this document). Using this curriculum, you should be able to create sessions that compliment their journal work. Or if you find their journal more helpful, you may choose to use this curriculum as a back up while encouraging volunteers to keep up with their journal. You should pick and choose among exercises in their journal and in this one to suit your needs.

Resources

Books on Christian Spiritual Discernment abound. You probably already have your favorites. Here are a few of mine:

Faithful Listening: Discernment in Everyday Life, by Joan Mueller

Listening Hearths: Discerning Call in Community, by Suzanne Farnham, et.al.

Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well, Pierre Wolff

The Discerning Heart: Discovering a Personal God, by Maureen Conroy

What God Wants from Your Life: Finding Answers to the Deepest Questions, by Frederick Schmidt

Healing the Purpose of Your Life, by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn

Discerning God's Will, by Ben Campbell Johnson

50 Ways to Pray: Practices from Many Traditions and Times, by Teresa Blythe

Lord, Teach us to Pray, PCUSA Office of Spiritual Formation binder of prayer practices

Handouts in the Resource Packet (found at the end of the curriculum in this document)

How do I know it's God?

Biblical Helps

Key discernment principles

Discerning God's desire for your life – a process

Historical examples of Listening to God

Rules of Life

Session 1

Basic Introduction to Christian Spiritual Discernment

Goal: Volunteers will come away with a basic familiarity with the Daily Examen and two key principles of discernment.

Hand out *Sleeping with Bread* books. Give a brief overview of the practice of the Daily Examen (as found in SLB) and ask the volunteers to commit to it, possibly even including the practice of Examen in their covenant. Give volunteers a spiral Examen notebook for journaling.

Define: Give your definition of “discernment” in the Christian spiritual tradition. Explain that discernment can be done around any important life choice. Our time together will focus primarily on “vocational discernment,” which is discovering the meaningful work that God is calling us to do. What is our “ministry” or service to the world? All work that God calls us to is ministry, not just those professional church or faith-based service related jobs!

Also, make it clear that discernment always centers on a question that you can—after some reflection, prayer and sifting—answer. In other words, you don’t discern how the world can have peace. That’s too big and abstract. You would do discernment around a question such as “Is God calling me to attend this particular peace protest or activity?” For most of our volunteers, the question will center on “is God calling me to this particular work or this other particular work?” Discernment narrows down our options and helps us focus on the concrete possibilities before us.

Show full 22 minute video *Finding God in All Things*, which gives an overview of Ignatian spirituality and introduces the Examen in common language. Find this video at a library of a local Catholic church or university. It can also be purchased from the Loyola Education Group for \$29.95 online at <http://www.loyolaeducationgroup.org/productviewer.asp?id=76801>.

Discuss: Freedom and Openness to a Variety of Outcomes.

Freedom

Spiritual freedom entails trusting in a God that is good and merciful; who wants the best for you. It also means we are honest and faithful in sharing with God our true feelings. We are free when we are strong, healthy and empowered. We are not free when we are addicted, obsessed with worry, plagued by low self-esteem or too busy and chaotic to enjoy life.

Ask: *What is freedom to you? How do you know if you are spiritually free?*

Reflection Exercise: *Think of a time in your life when you felt really free. It could be a moment; a season, an event. Spend time now in silence re-living that experience. Feel the freedom. (Allow 10 minutes of silence). Now what words would you use to describe how you felt in that freedom? (List the words on a board for all to see).*

Ask: *What is the opposite of freedom? How are people spiritually bound or oppressed? (List some of those answers on the board as well)*

Explain: in Christian spiritual discernment, it is important that we feel freedom in the presence of God. As you do your daily Examen, think of times in your day that experienced freedom as well as times you experienced feeling bound or unfree.

Openness to a Variety of Outcomes

If we trust God, then we are open to where God leads. That means we hold all our options lightly and are not rigidly tied to any one preferred outcome. Certainly we all have preferences, but if we stay open to

God's gentle guidance, those desires and preferences may change over time. Openness, or what is sometimes referred to as "holy indifference," means we allow that to happen because we trust God.

Ask: How do we do that? What if we can't do that?

Show: An example of vocational discernment. *Entertaining Angels* clip (20 minutes—clip in which Dorothy prays for guidance and meets Bro. Peter Maurin, Chapters 8 &9 on the DVD).

*How did Dorothy exhibit spiritual freedom?
How did she let go of outcomes?*

Offer: Individual spiritual direction –by appointment—to volunteers. Explain what it is and how it might be helpful.

Highlight: Part of exploring our vocation in community involves connecting with church communities in the upcoming year.

*In what way do you envision connecting with a church family?
How will your work connect you with local churches?
What assistance from us do you need in locating or reflecting on church commitments?*

For next session: Ask them to read *Sleeping with Bread*. It is short and interesting.

Session 2

Basic Principles of Spiritual Discernment Continued.

Goal: A deeper exploration of the basic principles of Christian spiritual discernment from a variety of traditions and interpretations. Beginning to understand consolation and desolation and their roles in discernment. (Note: they should have read *Sleeping with Bread* before this session.)

Discuss: The Daily Examen they are keeping.

*What have you noticed as you take note of your moments of closeness with God?
What have you noticed as you take note of your moments of distance from God?
Any patterns?*

Present and Discuss: What is consolation and desolation?

Based on *Sleeping with Bread* and your own understanding of discernment, talk a bit about how we know consolation (movements of the heart toward God) and desolation (movements of the heart away from God). Pass out the Ackerman handout. If you have other resource materials to give them, do so now.

Discuss: Ask volunteers for their impressions of consolation and desolation in their life. Log this on large pad or poster board to keep in the house or common area. Invite them to add to it from time to time!

How do we experience God in both consolation and desolation? Ask for examples.

Explain: Discernment is always steeped in listening prayer. The Examen is a good combination of a reflection prayer and a listening prayer. Listen to the inner movements of your heart as you pray. Ask, “What is changing in me as I pray?” Be open to the movements. And also spend time being still and silent—content to *not* get any concrete answer or movement at that moment. Just be.

For next session: Ask the volunteers to think in terms of consolation and desolation in their Daily Examen notebooks and in daily conversation with other volunteers. This will help the terms to sink in. Ask them to think about their emotions and insights as “movements of the heart” that can help them get in touch with God.

Resources for this Session:

How do I know it's God (by John Ackerman)
Biblical Helps (by Teresa Blythe)
Key discernment principles (by Teresa Blythe)
Discerning God's desire for your life (by Teresa Blythe)
Large notepad

Session 3

Addressing our blocks and fears.

Goal: Being honest and open about our blocks and fears around “hearing God’s voice.” Exploring what other Christians over the years and at present say about listening to God.

Explain and Discuss: Discerning many things will help us in discerning vocation. Life with Christ is constant discernment. Asking, this way or that? This choice or that one? What to do when both are good choices? How do you generally make the big decisions in your life? What is your past pattern? How might your Examen noticings lead you to a different way?

Story telling: The stories of how other Christians have listened to God’s leadings can be very helpful, especially stories from other cultures than our own. Acknowledge the fear and blocks that arise when we talk about “hearing God’s voice.” Using your own personal understanding of how God’s presence is felt in your life as well as your understanding of fears and blocks, and the handout on Historical Examples of Listening to God, tell a few stories about people’s experiences of prayer.

- MLK Jr.
- Sojourner Truth
- Andrea Crouch
- Hildegard of Bingen
- Add any stories and myths indigenous to your location

Then see if they have some stories to tell—friends or others who have spoken about God’s voice in their life. Begin an in-depth discussion of “how do we know it’s God?” Use your experience and skills as a spiritual guide to respond to their questions.

Re-emphasize: The role of prayer in discernment. Listening to God and for God is essential in Christian spiritual discernment. Ask:

How have you been communicating with God—or higher power—about your vocation lately? If the answer is not at all, then consider approaching prayer from a new perspective

Ask: *What are some feeling you have when you hear someone speak about hearing God’s voice?*

*How do you know when God is leading you? How have you known in the past?
What was the test you used?*

Show: Film clip from *Pollack* in which the artist Jackson Pollack experiences a rush of life-changing and career-changing creative energy after he spills some paint on the floor.

*When has life been “cracked wide open” for you?
What part of that clip do you most identify with right now?*

Resources Used:

Historical Examples of Listening to God
Film clip from *Pollack*

Session 4

How Others Did Vocational Discernment

Goal or Focus: Learning from others about their discernment.

For this session, invite a panel of people from your region (3-4) who can articulate how they discerned their call from God. We suggest perhaps one clergy person, one non-ordained church or social worker, and one layperson in a non-church profession who sees his or her work as a calling.

Open this session with introductions and ask each person to tell their story:

How did you discern that this was your life's work?

What role did prayer play in this discernment?

What might you have done differently as you look back?

What advice do you have for us now as you consider your journey?

Session 5

The Great Desires of our Life

Goal: Volunteers will be invited to reflect on their “great desires” in life.

Explain: Using what you understand and know about Ignatius of Loyola’s teachings on listening to “the great desires” of our life as a message from God, explain how desire has been a motivator in your life and in the life of others. The “great desires” that Ignatius speaks of are our deepest and truest desires in life. Not superficial, but those that we find when we are most honest and true with ourselves. Ignatius taught that our greatest desire needs to be to do only what pleases God. If we don’t feel that desire, we are to ask for it. For the purposes of this exercise, volunteers may want to begin by asking God to reveal to them their “great desires.”

Reflect and Discuss: Hand out index cards and pencils to the volunteers. Ask them to take 10 minutes of silence to reflect upon and write down *three great desires* in their life. At the end of the silence, ask volunteers to share what they wrote. Ask:

How do these great desires inform your vocational discernment?

What are the risks of following our great desires?

What are the benefits of following our great desires?

How does seeing God’s hand in our great desires change our perspective?

Prayer Exercise: With their “great desires” in their hand, invite them back into silence and ask them to choose one desire and to spend time visualizing, feeling and daydreaming about that desire. How might it play out in their life? What might it lead them to? What does living that desire look, feel, sound, smell like? Use all the senses to explore the desire and where it might lead.

Session 6

Where am I now with vocational discernment?

Goal: Naming which way they are leaning or which option they want to further pursue in vocational discernment.

Discussion: Ask volunteers to take some silence to consider how they are leaning vocationally (when they think about their life *after* this year of volunteering)? Deepen the question by asking them how they know how they are leaning. Is it an insight? A desire? A sense of passion? Or are they feeling an obligation? Pressure from outside?

Clearness Committee-style Exercise: This is an exercise in communal discernment and deep listening. It is steeped in silent prayer and should contain many moments of dropping into silence. You will be the timekeeper to make sure each volunteer gets a chance to be a “focus person.” You may also need to impose silence and breaks in the conversation if things start to move too fast. The pace should be very quiet and slow—prayerful.

Explain that they will be sharing, but in a very laid-back contemplative manner. Ask them to observe silence for several seconds between each sharing. Follow this format:

Each person will take time to share on the question that was asked in silence (how they are leaning vocationally and how they know that). The person sharing is called “the focus person.” You may want to pass an object to the person who is focus person (like the talking stick, a smooth stone or even a nerf ball). This object is a visual reminder that the focus is to remain on this person while they are speaking and discerning. When time for each focus person is up, you will ask them to pass the object to another person, who may choose to “pass for now” or proceed. Eventually, everyone shares in this exercise.

Ask the focus person to take their time answering and after each focus person finishes, there will be time for *honest, open ended questions* from the group to the focus person. An honest question is one that:

- Is not prefaced with a statement. Keep the question short and to the point.
- Has no preferred answer. Do not fish for an answer by asking a leading or loaded question. The question is designed to help the focus person further clarify his or her own thoughts.
- Isn't advice cloaked as a question. Example being, “have you thought about seeing a therapist?” That is a loaded question.
- Springs from the heart and wants the best for that person, regardless of what the answer is.
- Seeks to draw from the person their sacred truth.

Furthermore, these questions are not to be in any way: *advice, fixing, saving or setting someone straight*. If you feel you want to make a statement rather than a question, keep silent. **The facilitator steps in and asks for a re-framing of the question if it violates any of the guidelines.**

This process could take about two hours, depending on the number of volunteers. At the end, ask volunteers to talk about what it was like to share, listen and draw wisdom from one another in this way.

Session 7

Considering our vocational options

Goal: Reflecting concretely on a set of vocational options.

Reflection Exercise: Gather paper (unlined and some lined pads), pens, pencils and drawing tools for the volunteers. Also, create two half-page sized handouts. The first one will be for people who feel pretty clear about their direction in the upcoming year. It should contain the following questions:

What is my vocational choice?

What are some indications that this is God's desire for me?

What are the concrete steps I need to take toward this choice?

The other handout is for those people who are still unclear about the direction next year. This one will contain the following questions:

What do I know that I need any work I do to be about?

What work activities seem to give me the most life and energy? (Be concrete and specific)

What steps might I take to explore work that includes what I have identified in 1 and 2?

Invite the volunteers to grab any supplies they want. Then send them off to be alone with these questions for 20-30 minutes in silence and solitude. If they want to journal or sketch about the questions, they are encouraged to do so. They may want to create a poem or a dance about their situation. They need to be prepared to share their feelings and insights on the questions with the larger group at the end of the solitude. They may do this extemporaneously or they may share a poem, a drawing or a dance. Encourage them to be as creative as they want to be.

Sharing: Each person shares with no interaction or interruption in between until all have finished.

Session 8

The Spirituality of Sacred Landscapes

Goal or Focus: Appreciating the spirituality that reflects your landscape.

This session is suggested to help your volunteers connect even more deeply with the community and the land where they are working. In Tucson, for example, we do a session on “desert spirituality” where we talk about how the landscape draws us (and historically others) into prayer. We explore some Native American spirituality and we talk about the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the East.

Your session should reflect spiritual teachings and reflections on *your* landscape. Some suggestions for how to do this include:

- Explore the spiritualities of persons indigenous to your region. Invite someone to share with the group the essence the themes of that spirituality.
- Find poems, prayers and essays that reflect upon the land in your region. Use these as a basis for discussion and prayer.
- Where do many of the people who live in your area come from? For example, in Tennessee you might explore the history of the Scots-Irish and connections between Celtic Christianity and Appalachian spirituality. In the Pacific Northwest, you could explore Native American spirituality, and/or Eastern religious practices that inform Christianity. In Miami, African, Cuban and Caribbean practices could be explored.
- Explore how Christianity came to your area. Plan a field trip to a mission or early Christian site.
- Find a nice open space in nature for a session of prayer and meditation. (In *50 Ways*, the “lectio in nature” exercise would be excellent).
-

Discuss: *What has your experience in and around this landscape so far taught you about God’s presence and work in the world?* Allow time for sharing.

Resources Used:

50 Ways

Lord, Teach us to Pray, PCUSA Office of Spiritual Formation binder of prayer practices

Session 9 **Lenten Meditations Helpful for Discernment**

Goal: Listening to the words of Jesus as we discern. Designed to be used around Lent, but useful anytime.

Guided meditation I: on Matthew 4:1-11 (temptation in the desert) Begin by helping the volunteers relax and get comfortable in their seats. Perhaps lead a breathing exercise. Then invite them to listen as you read the scripture through once (slowly). Read it a second time inviting them to put themselves—in their imaginations—in the midst of the story. As you read the biblical story, stop along the way to invite volunteers to:

*Visualize, hear, smell and feel the desert where Jesus is led.
See, hear and feel the holy city and the pinnacle of the temple.
See hear and feel the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.
See, hear and feel Satan as he delivers all the temptations.
Put yourself in the story. Who are you? (Be whoever you feel led to be!) Where are you? What are you doing?
Put yourself in Jesus' place. How are you feeling? What are you longing for? What doubts creep into your mind?
Put yourself in Satan's place. What are you feeling? What is driving you?
Notice if the scene has changed visually for you in any way.
Hear the words of Jesus as he quotes what is written in scripture
Now as the angels come to minister to Jesus, see, hear and feel them around you as well.
What are the angels actually doing? Notice what they look like in your imagination.
In silence as we close, spend a few moments talking to Jesus and the angels. Listen to what they have to say to you.*

Discuss:

*What was it like to pray with your imagination?
What happened—for you—in that prayer?
What did the questions facing Jesus center around?
Which of those questions do you face?
What are your hopes and fears for the rest of the year?*

Guided meditation II: Use Matthew 11:7 – “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?” Send Volunteers out into nature for silence and solitude after hearing the scripture read twice. Ask them to reflect upon:

*What is your experience of wilderness?
What does this wilderness experience mean for your vocational discernment?
What do you hear God saying about your life? Your vocation? Your place in the universe?*

Group Reflection on solitude: *How do your musings differ when you are alone? Will you seek out solitude in the future? What were its gifts to you? What were its challenges?*

Session 10

Practical Considerations in vocational discernment

Goal: Assessing the practical considerations affecting our current vocational discernment choices. Honing in on the “pros and cons” around our choices.

Explain: A few important principles from Ignatian spirituality about practical matters.

- Spiritual discernment really begins with the rational and moves toward the center of our being. The rational is not *less important* but is vitally important to our decision.
- Without all the facts, we cannot make a faithful choice. Research is critical. When the facts change, our discernment may change as well. We may lean toward one way and then have a new fact (or insight about ourselves) introduced and we may find we no longer lean in that way.
- In this phase, we are assembling the information and ideas. Then evaluating them. We will later in the year let the mind descend into the center of the being—the body—for even more information.

Journal: Lead group through a time of jotting down the practical considerations. Use pads of paper.

- Page one. Jot down information and ideas about your vocational situation. Brainstorm.
- Page two. Explore practical considerations (what you can control). Make a list of Pros about the choice and Cons about the choice.
- Staying with Page two. Silence. Visualize yourself tackling these pros and cons. Give a weight to them, if need be. Some will be more important than others. Underline or star them for yourself. (10 minutes)

Share: Discuss with one another the practical considerations. Use talking circle guidelines--the person sharing has the floor and others are not to interrupt or interject during the sharing. Prayerful listening to one another. After everyone has shared with no interruptions, invite volunteers to interact with one another about what they have heard.

Discuss: Common dilemmas in discernment.

What do we do if the practical considerations point in one way but our heart/gut/instincts point in another? Where do we turn for guidance? What is more important to you, the practical matters or the “felt sense” about a choice? Which one do you usually privilege?

Resources Used:

50 Ways on focusing, deep listening and Ignatian discernment

Session 11

Tradition and discernment

Goal: Exploring the rich tradition of Christian mystical spirituality and discovering what it has to say to us and our experience working among poor people in our communities.

Invite a guest presenter to come and speak about a Christian mystic of his or her choice. Try to find someone in your region who is a self-taught “expert” on St. Francis, Calvin, Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, Jonathan Edwards, Dorothy Day or Thomas Merton, just to name a few. Make sure you ask this speaker to include in their talk what the saint or mystic had to say about poverty and simplicity.

After the short presentation, discuss with the presenter and volunteers:

How are you inspired by this person’s life? How are you challenged or repulsed? How are you like them? How are you different?

What did they have to say about discernment?

What is the challenge in us watching or considering the saints of old? How do we discover who we are to be when we hold these saints up as examples?

What intersections do you notice between this person’s life and work and your own this year?

Session 12

Listening to your Intuition and Imagination in vocational discernment

Goal: Deepening our understanding of the role of intuition and imagination in our lives and our discernment process.

Discuss: The role of intuition and imagination in life.

What is intuition to you? What role does it play in your life? When you look back at your Daily Examen, what role has your intuition played over this year? Does your intuition generally alert you to consolation? Or desolation? How have you used your intuition in the past? What do you do when your innards seem to sound an alert that something is not right in the path you are taking? Describe that experience.

What is imagination to you? What role does it play in your life? How have you used imagination in the past?

Exercise to build or notice Intuition: Being an Open Channel (adapted from Julia Cameron's *The Right to Write* p. 105).

Hand out pads and pens for those without journals
Invite participants to let go of nagging thoughts or worries
Invite them to show their Internal "censors" the door!
Lead some relaxation steps.
Ask God to be present in the intuition exercise
(If you want) Play soft music;

Imagine the wisest person you know has come to visit you. See this person. He or she doesn't have to be physically present in your life. It could be a character from the Bible. Or a person you've never met before until now—in your imagination.

You ask this person a question regarding your vocational discernment that has been on your heart. Write the question.

Listen carefully to what, in your imagination, this wise person says. Write down the answer. Don't think too hard about it. Let the thoughts flow. When finished with the first answer, ask another question. We're going to do this for 20 minutes with soft music playing. Just let it flow.

At the end of 20 minutes, ask if anyone wants to share their experience. Intuition is nurtured by silence, free-flowing imagination and openness to wonder. Use this exercise anytime you want to tap into your "below conscious" wisdom.

Explain: Ignatius' 3 questions to help determine a choice. In *The Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius suggests we put our discernment question to:

The rocking chair test – *Imagine you are elderly and are looking back on your life. Which choice do you wish you had made?*

The eternal judgment test – *You are facing God and God asks you why you made the choice you did. What is your explanation?*

The best friend test – *Your best friend comes to you with the exact same choice you are facing and asks you what they should do. What advice do you give them?*

Exercise to build or notice Imagination: Lead participants through a 10 minute silent guided meditation on two of the tests:

Think of the vocational choices that are before you.

Now imagine you are very old and you are thinking back on your life. Which choice would make you happy and satisfied as an older person?

Now imagine your best friend comes to you with a choice identical to what you are facing. He or she asks you for your opinion—what should they do? What do you advise?

Discuss: *What did you experience in the imagination meditation?*

Resources Used:

50 Ways

The Right to Write, Julia Cameron.

Session 13

Using our bodies in prayer around discernment.

Goal or Focus: An experience of using our bodies in prayer to assist with discernment. Specifically, walking a Labyrinth and doing Focusing Prayer.

If possible, find a nice sized, preferably outdoor labyrinth in your region. If you are not sure where one might be, begin by calling Catholic or Episcopal churches in your area and asking. You can also find locations online. If no labyrinths are to be found, you may be able to locate one that is rolled out onto a floor. If all this fails, read about some creative ways to have a labyrinth experience in *50 Ways* in the chapter on Body Prayer.

The Labyrinth Experience: Gathered at the labyrinth, describe the 3 classical movements of the walking prayer:

Purgation – walking toward the center, letting go of all that stands in the way of God. Intention is “holy indifference” to particular outcomes.

Illumination – Sitting or standing in the center in prayer, asking for God’s light to illumine us. This is where you may pose, again, your discernment question to God. Listen for God’s prompting. Stay as long as you like here.

Union – The walk away from the center out to the world where you bear God to all. Ponder the ways you might live out what you felt God was prompting in the center.

Another way to pray in the labyrinth is to take a discernment question in and ask God for guidance as you walk. Allow 30 – 45 minutes for everyone to walk the labyrinth.

Discussion: *What did you experience while walking or being at the center of the labyrinth? What was it like to move during prayer? How did you feel your body respond to this prayer?*

Focusing Prayer Experience: You may want to move inside for this one, in order to reduce distractions. Explain that this prayer allows a “felt sensation” in the body to provide discernment information for us. We can listen to the wisdom God gives our bodies to help make decisions. Lead the focusing prayer like a guided meditation, allowing a lot of silence between each question. This prayer is done in silence and can be reflected on in the group at the end.

- Focusing steps:
 - Close your eyes and breathe. Let your awareness settle to the center of your body. What do you feel there?
 - What location or part of your body wants your awareness right now? (Spend time allowing this to emerge). Is there an important feeling in your body that needs listening to right now?
 - Communicate with this felt sense in your body. Tell it, “I’m here. I’m listening.” Ask this bodily feeling if it’s alright to go further.
 - What is the best way to describe this felt sense or sensation in your body? Is there an image that emerges? If it helps, give it a name (such as “tight neck” or “lump in the throat”).
 - Sit with this body awareness without judgment. Simply observe.
 - Does this bodily sense have an emotional quality? What is it?
 - Ask “What gets it so _____ (name the emotion)?”
 - Ask the sensation what it needs.
 - Ask your body to show you how healing would feel.
 - You may want to put your hand on that part of the body and send it warmth. Also, if you feel so moved, ask Jesus, God or the Holy Spirit to help you care for this part of yourself.

- Gently end your conversation with the felt sense. Thank your body and its senses for being with you in this prayer.
- End by journaling about what this bodily sense has to say to you about your life. Where do you feel God's healing touch most deeply? How is it to pray in this way? How is it to listen to your body?

Resources Used:

50 Ways chapter on body prayer
Outdoor labyrinth

Session 14

Making and sitting with the choice.

Goal: If not already done, it is time for volunteers to make a discernment choice around vocation for the upcoming year. The choice is what they intend to do, and will still require further discernment, depending on how their options are received by others. If the choice has been made, then the volunteer may reflect on how that choice feels at this time. This session may also be done during the one-on-one times with volunteers.

Discuss the Daily Examen. *How are they going? Where are you experiencing God's love and mercy these days? Where are you finding blocks to God's love in your life?*

When you think about the upcoming year, after your time with this site is complete, what choice are you currently leaning toward making? When did you feel the choice was really made? What were you doing? How did you know it was the best choice for you? How have your connections with local churches deepened your experience of God? How have they helped you with vocational discernment?

Session 15

What have we learned?

Goal: An experience of waiting and listening to our many senses around the choice we have made.

Review: The concepts of consolation and desolation.

Has your understanding of these movements deepened over the last year? How so?

Offer 20 minutes of soft music time in which volunteers will reflect on what they are feeling around their choice.

What is their consolation? What is their desolation? (It's normal to have both!) What do they continue to struggle with? What are they looking for—from God—in order to fully proceed with this choice by taking action?

Bring their attention back to the larger circle and initiate a discussion in which everyone shares both their consolation and desolation.

Intercessory prayer: Invite prayer requests from the volunteers. How would they like us to pray for their situations?

Final Review: Offer an overview in a nutshell:

- Step 1: Listen to the great desires
- Step 2: Test them in prayer and in community
- Step 3: Take the leap of faith
- Step 4: Repeat steps 1-3.

Discuss:

Who are some of the people this year who have been helpful in assessing what your professional call is to be? Who and what are you grateful for as you end this year?

Resource Used:

50 ways

Session 16

Living Faithfully and Discerning Well for a Lifetime

Goal: Looking forward to a life in which discernment is a constant spiritual discipline.

Explain: Many spiritually grounded people develop a “Rule of Life” – intentions for prayer and action that they live by. Hand out copies of famous people’s “rules” – Benedict, Martin Luther King, etc. (Handout in resource packet). Offer an array of books, handouts and helps from your private collection for volunteers to consider.

Reflection: While music is playing, ask volunteers to consider how they might develop a “rule of life” to take with them as they leave the program. Explain that the rule is not fixed in stone. It is a set of intentions. Encourage them to write this rule and hold onto it for at least a year.

Ending Celebration: Go around the circle and name each person. As they are named, ask everyone to pray that the light of Christ will shine brightly in and through them. See the light. Feel the light. After the last person’s name is called, ask the group to see and feel the light encompass the entire circle, then growing to the neighborhood, expanding to all the region finally end with a vision of the whole world shining in the light of Christ.

Resource Used: Handout on Rules of Life

The end.

The Resource Packet

Of

Handouts

How Do I Know It's God

We Hear, See, and Sense?

1. This word, call, direction, voice, sounds like God. There is an objective nature about God that surpasses my subjective feeling and thinking. We can find a consistency in the character of God as revealed in Scripture, especially in Jesus Christ.

Question: Does this sound like God?

2. The subjective reaction is a gift from the Holy Spirit. It is consistent with other experiences I have had that are sheer gift. The experience may not be ecstasy, joy, peace, or love, but those gifts point to the one who gives them.

Question: Is this word, call, direction consistent with God's history with us?

3. The fruits are spiritual: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. They come together as a package.
 - We are centered with God and ourselves and in community with other.
 - Love is not compulsive busyness, but an interdependent relationship, mutual. It is not just feelings or an attitude, but action being. We are connected to our nearest and dearest, to others in community that we may dislike, and to the poor and downtrodden.
 - Peace or serenity may be the major sign. This is not a false peace that comes from having an answer, but the inner certainty that lasts through ups and downs. It is a deep trust in God that all shall be well despite what happens to me.
 - There may be tears of joy, clarity, a sense of things coming together.

Question: What are the fruits?

4. Our will and the Spirit of God are working together. We are not willful, trying to make things happen that we cannot control. We are not willfully passive, but are doing the things we need to do. We are willing, both actively, in doing gracefully what is ours to do, and passively, in surrendering what is God's or another's to do.

Question: Are we willing? Is Jesus Lord?

5. We check things out with mature Christians and listen to their guidance.

Question: What does the larger community say?

How can you write a summary of these questions briefly so that you can remember?

This resource was developed by John Ackerman and is published *Listening to God* (Herndon, VA: Alben Institute, 2001), FTE-VEV Resource Handout 5.

Biblical Helps for Discernment By Teresa Blythe

Examples of Encounters with God

(Note the many ways God is revealed to humans...and the many ways people respond)

Jacob's dream at Bethel. Genesis 28: 10-17. Jacob's first vision of God and it includes a promise. God makes no request of Jacob, simply promises him God's presence. Are your dreams a source of information from God? What has God promised you?

Hebrew midwives feared God. Exodus 1: 8-22. Shiphrah and Puah are ordered, by the King of Egypt, to kill all the Hebrew baby boys at their births. But the two women *feared God* and not their ruler and cleverly lied their way out of a horrific situation. This is not an example of God speaking directly to a human, but of a human response to evil based on great faith in God. How does your faith determine your loyalties?

Moses' Call and Conversation with God. Exodus 3 and 4. God hears the misery of the Hebrew people and visits Moses to command him to lead his people out of slavery. Moses resists God in many ways, and at each turn, God provides for Moses what Moses needs—even when God gets angry at Moses for saying “Please God, send someone else.” How has God provided you with what you need to do what God asks of you?

Young Samuel runs to God. 1 Samuel 3 – 4:1. Samuel doesn't recognize God's voice but thinks the person he is hearing is his mentor Eli. When Eli tells Samuel it is the Lord who is speaking, Samuel eagerly listens to God, only to find out he has to relay a terrible message to Eli. How have your mentors helped you listen to God's voice? With God's help, are you able to speak the truth, even when it is hard for others to hear?

Ruth responds from deep desire and love. Ruth 1. Ruth clings to her mother-in-law Naomi and follows her to a foreign land, responding from a deep sense of commitment and love. Ruth's loyalty results in a marriage to Boaz and a child that becomes the grandfather of the future king David. Have you ever allowed such deep desire and passion to lead you in a direction that changed your life's path?

Naaman thinks God's will should be harder. 2 Kings 5:1-19. Naaman, a military commander with a terrible skin disease, is told by the prophet Elisha to go wash in the River Jordan seven times and he will be healed. Naaman wanted more theatrics or a task more substantial. His servants say to him “if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?” Naaman sees their point and does as Elisha commanded, and he is healed. Have you ever stumbled in following God, or been surprised because you expected that what God would ask of you would be more difficult than it turned out to be?

The Call of the Prophets of Israel. Check any of the prophetic books in the Hebrew scriptures and you will find “call stories” that fit a general description:

1. God appears unmistakably to the person and says “Thus said the Lord” along with a message for a specific person or nation. It is frequently a message of woe, which puts the prophet in physical danger. He then has to defend against the question, “how do we know God has uttered this message?”
2. The prophet demures or resists what God asks of him. Many times a supernatural event occurs to reassure him (see Moses' story above). This event helps the prophet build a case so that when he approaches the powers-that-be he can say something like, “of course this word is from God. Do you think I would be masochistic enough to come up with this on my own? It is not I who speaks, but I am only a representative of the Lord.”
3. The prophet reluctantly does what God commands and takes his lumps. He is only recognized as a prophet if what he proclaims comes to pass. So he has a time of anxiety and waiting.

How is it that *you* know God is giving you a task? Do you react like the prophets? Which prophet's story do you feel most drawn to? Does it fit your own?

Jesus calls Levi. Mark 2:17-17. Much like Simon, Andrew, James and John, Jesus merely says to Levi (the tax collector) "follow me" and Levi gets up and follows Jesus. The scandal of the story is that Jesus called a tax collector to be one of his followers—a profession reviled and hated by most people. Are you surprised when God chooses you for a task even though it may seem you are not quite a "fit" for that task? How eagerly do you get up and follow?

Some Biblical Guidelines for Discernment

God's desire is planted in our hearts. Deuteronomy 30. This chapter not only explains the conditional covenant between God and Israel, but it offers some guidelines for righteous living. Choose *life* over death. The word is *in your heart to observe*. I (God) am with you through it all.

Pay attention to the little voice. Isaiah 30: 21. When you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."

The nature of Wisdom. Wisdom of Solomon (Apocryphal book) 7:22-8-1. The Wisdom of God is described in this listing of virtues. (Wisdom, in biblical wisdom literature, is personified as a woman.) Some of the virtues useful for discernment: holy, clear, humane, steadfast, free from anxiety, penetrating through all spirits.

Blessed are..... Matthew 5 – 7. The Sermon on the Mount (or Luke's Sermon on the Plain) includes excellent benchmarks for discernment. Is my choice merciful? From a pure heart? Just? Does it contribute to peace?

Fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22. Test all your choices by this list. Even though it is not an exhaustive list, it is one of the best in the Bible. Jesus frequently spoke of knowing what is holy by the "fruit produced." Love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.

Think on these things. Philippians 4: 8-9. Another list to help you make choices and test "spirits." Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, any excellence, anything worthy of praise—think about these things.

Wisdom from above. James 3:17-18. God's wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Note: This is not, by any means, an exhaustive list. You will discover discernment helps throughout the Bible. Make a note of which ones seem best for you to use. Also, note which of the above stories or lists you are most drawn to. Don't try to make your experience of God fit one of these stories. Just notice what your experience of God is like and celebrate it.

Key Discernment Principles and their Corresponding Questions

By Teresa Blythe, tblythe@jps.net

1. Discernment hinges on a concrete life question; a choice between two or more options. *What is the question I need to discern?*
2. Christian spiritual discernment is steeped in prayer. *How am I praying about this question? What emerges as a result of my prayer?*
3. Good discernment listens to one's truest and deepest desires. *What is it that I most want in life? How do these options satisfy those "great desires?"*
4. To discern well, one needs to listen carefully to the "movements of the heart" in daily life. *What events, moments, decisions give me deep peace, gratitude, energy, love and joy? (consolation) What events, moments, decisions give me anxiety, chaos, despair, deadness? (desolation)*
5. Good discernment leaves the outcome open and in God's hands. *Can I be at peace with whatever God shows me in this discernment, regardless of outcome? If not, do I at least desire to be open to God's revelation in this matter? If the answer to that is "no," then pray for the desire to be open.*
6. One must be spiritually free (from fear, addiction, compulsion) in order to discern well. *What fears or blocks are getting in the way of exploring this question?*
7. To discern well, one needs a thorough knowledge of the options and practical considerations. *What are the facts surrounding the question? Whose lives are affected by these options? What are the pros and cons for each option?*
8. The options under consideration must be weighed using head, heart and body wisdom. *Which option feels most rational to me? Which one speaks to my heart? Which option "just feels right?" As I consider this choice, what bodily senses am I experiencing?*
9. Discernment involves imagining yourself making a choice and reflecting on the future. *If I make this choice now, how might I feel, act or be in the future? What does thinking about this choice make me feel like now?*
10. Christian spiritual discernment always considers how the option under consideration affects your family, community and people who are poor, forgotten and hurting. *How is my choice advancing God's reign in the world? How is my choice affecting people who have fewer choices than I?*
11. Discernment doesn't go on forever. At some point you must take action. *As I make the choice, do I feel a sense of lasting peace? Where do I feel alive? Blocked?*
12. Good discernment is evaluated later, as the "fruit of the Spirit" (or not!) emerges. *What has been the outcome of making this choice? Do I still feel consolation around the choice? Do I need to do more discernment?*

Discerning God's Desire for Your Life

A Process of Discernment for Individuals

By Teresa Blythe
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The Preparation – What is the Question?

- Begin in silent prayer.
- When you think from your deepest, truest self, what is your burning desire in life right now? (Keep it concrete, and be as specific as you can be.)
- Write this desire somewhere.
- Reflect on this desire.
 - What do you notice?
 - Does a question for discernment emerge for you? Is there a choice facing you that needs to be made?
- Develop a discernment QUESTION. It needs to be relatively concrete and specific. Keep the focus on what GOD is inviting you to be or do. Even if you feel that knowing that is hard to determine. Examples of specific and concrete questions:
 - Is it time to leave this job for another one?
 - Is it God's desire that I get more education?
 - Is God leading me to deepen a current relationship? And if so, in what way?

Preparatory Check-In

- Can you be at peace with whatever God shows you in this discernment, regardless of the outcome? If not, ask God to help with that?
- Do you desire to know what God wants in this situation? If there is a fear or a block, acknowledge it and ask God for help.

Practical Matters

- What are the facts surrounding the question?
- What are the practical considerations?
- What are the options for answering the question?
- Pros and cons for each option?
- What beliefs and values affect this question?

Intuition and Felt Senses

- In silent prayer (allow at least 20 minutes), listen to your intuition as individuals around the options you face in answering the question. If you need to walk around or stretch or go outside, please do so.
- In silence, listen to your body's "felt senses."
- Make a note of how your body is leaning on this question. Write about your "gut feelings."

Imagination

- Imagine standing before God (or Jesus) to explain the decision you made on the question. Imagine explaining each option to God. What do you imagine God's reaction to be? (Allow at least 20 minutes for the imagination prayer)

Make the Choice

- You have considered the facts, the intuition, the imagination, and have prayed. Now it's time to make the choice. Search for which way *you* feel God is leading. What choice feels like the one that God desires?
- As you make the choice, contemplatively sit with and reflect upon the following questions:
 - Where do I feel consolation around this choice?
 - Where do I feel desolation around this choice?

Take the Action & Evaluate

- Reflect on this choice for an appropriate amount of time and see you feel consolation or desolation around the choice. What is the FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT? Continue to keep the choice in prayer.
- At some point, discernment always leads to ACTION. So you have to take the leap of faith. Set a time frame for doing that.
- After taking the leap and making the action, notice the early outcome. Does the discernment need revisiting? (It's not a sign of failure if it does—discernment is spiritual art and mystery, not science!)
- Keep praying and listening to your deepest greatest desires.
- Keep using principles of discernment for making faithful choices. Tweak the process if need be—make it yours.

Historical Examples of Listening to God

“Insights, visions of hidden and wonderful things.”

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a Benedictine sister, was a mystic who had visions about God from the age of 5 onward. She was considered a prophet, a “seer” and a sort of “Dear Abby” by all who knew her. Powerful men like Bernard of Clairvaux and the Pope as well as peasant women came to her for guidance. She writes of one vision: “I beheld a great brightness through which a voice from heaven addressed me: O fragile child of earth, ash of ashes, dust of dust, express and write that which thou seest and hearest.” She dictated her writing to others and wrote many beautiful chants that we still enjoy today. –from *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, edited by Elizaveth Alvilda Petroff.

“Thank you God for that thought!”

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), born into slavery with the name Isabella and sold three times as a slave, made her escape with one daughter (leaving three other children of hers behind) in 1850 just a few months before her state of New York emancipated slaves born two years after her birthday. She gave herself the name of Sojourner Truth at age 46 and in her 50’s became a fiery speaker for civil and women’s rights. A Christian, Sojourner tells the story of her escape, wondering out loud to God, “How can I get away?” She told God she was afraid to leave in the night and if she left by daylight everyone could see her, so she was in a bind. As she prayed, the thought came to her that she could leave just before the day dawned and get out before people were “much astir.” “Yes,” she said, fervently, “that’s a good thought! Thank you, God for *that* thought!” So, receiving it as coming directly from God, she acted on it and stepped away from Master Dumont’s house, her infant on one arm and her wardrobe on the other. – from *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* found online at www.sojournertruth.org

“I can’t face this alone.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) was only 25 years old at the time of the Montgomery bus boycott. He was an associate pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist church when he was first asked to take part in the boycott. At first, he resisted getting involved but once involved he was a target of angry, threatening phone calls. In his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, he talks about praying at the end of a bad day. He had gone to bed late and was about to doze off when he got one of these phone calls. After he hung up, he could not sleep. He got up, walked the floor and prayed. He was considering giving up and getting out of the civil rights movement. King said to God: “I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.” In that moment, King says, he knew the Divine presence in a way he had never before experienced it. It was a turning point in his life. –from *Stride Toward Freedom* with commentary from *The Courage the Heart Desires* by Kathleen Fischer

“Two words formed in my mind”

Andrae Crouch (1942 -) is a gospel music “hall of famer” with seven Grammy awards to his name. He’s also pastor of the New Christ Memorial Church of God in Christ in San Fernando, CA. Crouch has had many experiences where he felt God seemed to speak to him in a straightforward manner. One striking example was when he was a senior in college. He fell deeply in love with a young woman who moved to Boston and he felt desperate to follow her there. He prayed for guidance and says “As I sat on my bed with eyes shut tight, two words formed instantly in my brain: ‘Don’t go.’” This was not the answer he wanted so he repeated the request, asking God to guide him. Again the words formed in his mind, “Don’t go.” He wondered if this was, in fact from God. He went to Boston anyway. A few days later, he left, heartbroken. His girlfriend had broken up with him and asked him to leave. He says God had guided him in two ways—by telling him not to go; but also by confirming that it was God’s voice when he verified it by going. –story told in *Godspeech* by Ben Campbell Johnson

Rules for Prayer

(adapted from the book *Rules for Prayer* by William O. Paulsell)

People of prayer frequently have intentional practices and attitudes that they cultivate. Based on St. Benedict's famous "Rule" for his order, we call these "Rules for Prayer." Rule doesn't mean mandatory or obligatory. It's an intention for finding space for God.

Many of these people didn't call what they developed a "rule." But in William Paulsell's book, he lists a few culled from their writings. Read these over to get some ideas for your own rule.

John Calvin's Six Reasons for Praying

1. That we might develop a desire to seek God, turning to God in every need.
2. That our hearts may be free of any desire we would not want to put before God, while at the same time we learn to take all our wishes to God.
3. That our prayer remind us that all benefits come from God.
4. That in having our prayers answered we may meditate upon the kindness of God.
5. That we receive with great joy what has been obtained by prayer.
6. That our experience with prayer confirm the providence of God.

Calvin's "Rule"

1. Pray with great reverence, with hearts free of "carnal cares and thoughts."
2. Pray with an awareness of our own weaknesses and insufficiencies, yet also with a burning desire.
3. Give up all thoughts of our won glory and self-assurance and plead for the forgiveness of sins.
4. Pray with the certain hop that our prayers will be answered.
5. Pray first thing in the morning, before beginning daily work, when we sit down for a meal, when we have eaten, and when we go to bed at night.

Anthony Bloom – Orthodox Bishop

1. Realize our poverty, that we keep nothing forever.
2. Everything we have is a sign of the love of God.
3. We have been willed into existence by God.
4. Avoid images of God.
5. Understand that God is to be found within us.
6. Pray spontaneously, biblical prayers that others have prayed before, and pray the Jesus Prayer (Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon us)

Dorothy Day – 20th Century Advocate for the Poor

1. Practice the presence of God; be aware of God's presence.
2. Attend eucharist daily.
3. Read the Bible regularly.
4. Look for Christ's presence in the poor.
5. Pray morning and evening, using the psalms.
6. Keep a journal.
7. Pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day.
8. Use the Jesus Prayer

Com Helder Camara – Brazilian Catholic Bishop and Advocate for the Poor

1. Pray when others are asleep. (For him it was 2 – 4am).
2. Listen for the voice of God in the poor.
3. See Christ in other people, especially those who suffer.
4. Be prepared to give up power, privilege and prosperity.
5. Pray the breviary (Catholic liturgical book containing prayers, liturgies and notations for daily prayer) regularly.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Lutheran theologian and Holocaust martyr

1. Read the Bible morning and evening.
2. Pray the psalms daily.
3. Recite hymns
4. Maintain a daily routing rather than giving in to weakness which causes a loss of power
5. Include thanksgiving prayers, even in the worst situation. It enables us to look beyond the present moment.
6. Meditate on the life, teachings, suffering and death of Jesus.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. Meditate daily on the life and teachings of Jesus
2. Live in the manner of love
3. Pray daily to be used by God
4. Sacrifice personal wishes
5. Perform regular service for others
6. Stay in good bodily and spiritual health
7. Pray for the oppressor

The Rule of St. Benedict

1. Use the tools of good works (10 commandments, Golden Rule, renounce the self, love fasting, look after the poor, love enemies and endure persecution, fear the day of judgment, listen to holy reading, pray, confess sins, avoid gratifying the flesh, settle disputes before the day ends, and never lose hope in the mercy of God.
2. Practice hospitality.
3. Read the Bible and the church fathers and mothers.
4. Develop a rhythm of prayer and work
5. Treat each other as Christ.

The Rule of Taize

1. Practice self control and denial.
2. Be a sign of joy and love to others
3. Love the dispossessed and those suffering injustice
4. Have a zeal for the unity of the church
5. Practice common prayer three times a day
6. Practice personal prayer
7. Have interior silence
8. Practice simplicity of life
9. Practice mercy and avoid judgment

Rules for Community Living

As we prepare to provide folks with insights and best practices around community life, below are a set of appropriate questions and categories. There are many different terms that groups use to describe the standards and expectations that people use when setting up and running houses of intentional living. For the purpose of simplicity, the term Rule of Community Life has been used to describe this ideal.

Hopefully, this exercise will provide insight and information to existing and new groups around how to best structure their community life. The goal here is to identify questions that should be asked when developing rules of community life and responses to those questions. We should be able to create a context for participants where they can understand that if you do this, you can expect this. The resulting resource will help define a way of intentional living.

Some of these terms may not be the ones that everyone uses. Please be advised as you encounter them.

I) Rules of Community Life

- Does your program have a set of rules that set the standard for community life in an intentional community?
- Are participants required to sign an agreement?
- When do participants first see the Rules for Community Life?
- Do questions or challenges ever arise in regards to participants agreeing to these Rules of Community Life before they sign a contract or agreement?

II) Writing the Rules for Community Life

- If so, when is it signed?
- How were rules developed?
- What resources were used when writing them? Were any resources particularly helpful when writing them?
- How have these rules evolved over time?
- What type of input do new volunteers have on the rules for community life?
- What type of opportunities do volunteers who are ending their term of service have?
- Do you describe your community life as explicitly Christian? If not how is it described?
- What has worked in regards to the set of rules that you currently have?
- What has not worked?
- If you could change up to three things about the Rules of Community Life that you have know, what would those changes be?

III) Aspects of Community Life

Security

- Do you have rules as to how the house is to be locked up and kept secure? Is the house expected to be locked at all times? Are people asked to leave lights on?

Food and Drink

- How is food paid for (pooled resources, funds from the program? Other?)
- How are shopping, cooking and cleaning handled?
- Do you have meals together? How often? What are the expectations?
- Do you have guest for dinner? Is there an expectation that housemates will be told that guests will be coming for a meal?
- Are there any rules as to when guests can come for dinner?

Daily Life

- What expectations do you have around daily chores?
- Cooking? Dishes? Trash? Cleaning? Bathrooms?

Guests and Significant Others

- Do you allow overnight guests?
- What's the deal with significant others? Are they allowed to stay over? Is there any kind of limit as to how long they can stay?

Other Involvements and Income

- Do members not come home at night (house sitting, staying with friends or parents)? What is the expectation for communicating such events?
- Do members have other part-time jobs?
- Are those jobs over (work at Starbucks) or under (babysitting) the table?

III) Faith Formation, Spiritual Exploration and Vocational Discernment

- Are there expectations that members will engage in a particular spiritual practice?
- What is that practice (meals together, bible study, praying?)
- Do you have any kind of retreats that involve faith?
- Is your faith activity explicitly Christian or does it involve other faith traditions? Please explain and describe these events.
- Are you connected with any local faith community? Is this a requirement or up to each individual?
- Are there any people in the community that serve as an ongoing resource for this part of your community life (a local pastor, a community volunteer, a person hired by your program to engage with you)?

IV) Engaging other volunteer programs

- Are there other faith-based young adult volunteer programs in your community?

- Do you know who they are? Where they live?
- Do you ever hold events (formal or informal together)? Describe.
- Do you reach out to other young adult volunteer programs (Teach for America, City Year, VISTA)?

V) Facing Challenges

- What rules do you have in place when community life is not going well? (For example someone is not living up to the expectations or there is a disagreement about the interruption of the community life rules)
- Who do volunteers turn to if there is a problem?
- How is conflict resolved?
- Who gets involved?
- Who has the ultimate say as to what happens in regard to resolving the conflict?
- Does the conflict get resolved in a timely fashion? Describe.

VI) Removing members who do not live up to Community Life Standards

- Do you have a system set up to honorably (fairly and effectively) remove people from the community?
- What is that process?
- What kind of help is provided to someone who has been asked to leave the community?
- If someone leaves the community, do they automatically his/ her service placement?

Bethany Presbyterian House of Hospitality

1) Briefly describe your program.



- Bethany Presbyterian House of Hospitality is a renovated communal living space situated in the former Bethany Church parish house, just three blocks from the Trenton, NJ train station and a block away from a bus line.
- We have designed Bethany House to be an intentional young adult community that draws on the tradition of service and justice that we understand to be at the core of our faith commitments.
- Each week, one or more of our congregations sponsor a time of food and fellowship at the House, augmenting the regular meals that the community will prepare. During this time together, we have Vespers. We often use the curriculum, “Vespers: A Year Long Journey of Faith and Service” (<http://www.faithandservice.org/>) We also introduce Residents to church and community leaders from many different walks of life.
- Several times a year the Residents are invited to local community events and benefit from free tickets to the local theatre productions.



- Residents benefit from having a resident doctor on call.

2) Explain the steps it took to get started

- Rev. Wayne Meisel presented the idea to New Brunswick Presbytery’s Committee on Higher Education several years prior to its founding. The Committee adopted the idea but it did not become a reality initially due to the lack of an available house and a large pool of potential residents.



- With appropriate tactfulness and compassion, Rev. Wayne Miesel asked the Urban Mission Cabinet to endorse the renovation of a church's Parish House, after the untimely death of their pastor, Rev. Alice Bijjini.
- The \$10,000 seed money from Cousins Foundation and the matching donation from Nassau Presbyterian Church as well as the Bonner Foundation, Princeton Theological Seminary and EducationWorks commitment to assist with recruitment which led to UMC's unanimous endorsement.
- The UMC requested approval from the New Brunswick Presbytery to use its Urban Fund resources to renovate the Parish House, to formally dedicate the Bethany House of Hospitality, and to hire a part time Chaplain/Coordinator,
- New Brunswick Presbytery's approved all the UMC requests and dedicated the Bethany Presbyterian House of Hospitality on November 12, 2011.



3) Describe Recruitment and Selection

- We created an application and a process after visiting and learning from existing houses of hospitality. Residents are interviewed and selected by Bethany House Chaplain/Coordinator and UMC representatives.



- In order to benefit from the “vetting” of our partner organizations and in order to ensure that the pool of potential Residents would be serving in the Trenton Area. We limited our recruitment to:
 - a. Bonner AmeriCorps and Vista Members
 - b. Princeton Theological Seminary students and referrals
 - c. EducationWorks of New Jersey members

4) What Funding/Volunteer Support did you receive?

Funding & Donations

- | | |
|--|---------------|
| 1) Nassau Presbyterian Church | \$10,000 |
| 2) Cousins Foundation | \$10,000 |
| 3) UMC Mission Critical Fund | \$20,000-plus |
| 4) Wright Memorial Presbyterian Church:
Kitchen Appliances & Utensils | |
| 5) Rev. Wayne & KP Meisel:
Bed and other household items | |
| 6) Rev. Dr. Katherine Sakenfeld:
Desk for UMC, Inc. Office | |

Urban and Suburban Churches that volunteered to renovate Bethany House:

- 1) Covenant Presbyterian Church
- 2) Lawrence Rd. Presbyterian Church
- 3) Westminster Presbyterian Church
- 4) Central Baptist Church
- 5) Hamilton Square Presbyterian Church
- 6) Nassau Presbyterian Church



Church Members Volunteered to Host Meals

- 1) Community Presbyterian Church, Sand Hills
- 2) Covenant Presbyterian Church
- 3) First Presbyterian Church of Dutch Neck
- 4) Lawrence Rd. Presbyterian Church*
- 5) Lawrenceville Presbyterian Church
- 6) Nassau Presbyterian Church*
- 7) Westminster Presbyterian Church*



Local Pastors, Church and Community leaders volunteered to facilitate Vespers:

- 1) Rev. Nina Reeder*
- 2) Jacque Howard*
- 3) David Byers*
- 4) Linda Konrad-Byers*
- 5) Angela Johnson
- 6) Stephani Register
- 7) Dr. Jane Rohlf (**volunteered to provide medical care services/consultation for Residents**)
- 8) Rev. Patti Daley
- 9) Rev. Wayne Meisel*
- 10) Princeton Theological Seminary Students
- 11) Rev. Dr. D.A. Graham
- 12) Bill Davis
- 13) Rev. Nancy Schulter
- 14) Liz Pesco
- 15) David Pettit

***Indicates hosting or serving more than once**



5) What are your rules for community life?

- Residents are asked to live simply, participate in a communal way, and explore both new and ancient spiritual practices, all the while engaging in the neighborhood where they live and with the organizations that they serve.
- Residents participate in a year of spiritual exploration, vocational discernment, and education and conversation around current issues in social justice.
- Residents participate in shared meals and weekly Vespers.
- Conflicts are dealt with first of all amongst the Residents themselves, and then the Chaplain/Coordinator is invited to help resolve conflicts.

6) What programming have you had during the year?

- Residents volunteered at:
 - a) Westminster Presbyterian Church
 - b) The English School of Lawrence Rd. Presbyterian Church*
 - c) The former Bethany Presbyterian Church Facility*
 - d) Columbus Park*
 - e) Franklin Street Park
 - f) Trenton Central High School
- Residents helped to create the Bethany House Community Garden in partnership with UMC, The Crisis Ministries, and suburban church volunteers. The produce is harvested by the Residents, given to The Crisis Ministries, who then distributes to their food pantry clients. New Brunswick Presbytery dedicated the Bethany Garden July 18, 2012.



7) What were some of the challenges and how did you overcome them.

- Convincing our presbytery to endorse the founding of a House of Hospitality was a bit challenging at first, because the first attempt years prior was not successful. We overcame the challenge by emphasizing the fact that the Bonner Foundation had gotten a grant to increase its AmeriCorps and Vista member slots to over 50 potential members. Therefore, our potential for recruiting Residents was very promising.
- Renovating the Bethany House within the schedule that matched the demand for housing by potential Residents was a challenge. Most AmeriCorps, Vista, members and seminarians look for housing availability in August and/or September. Bethany House's renovation was completed in October 2011, so we had to settle for having only four founding Residents instead of five. By May of 2012, the house was filled to capacity.

8) What were the joys and how wonderful were they?

- The Residents became a close knit community. It was great to see them support each other through illnesses, the death of loved ones, and frustrating challenges at the sites where they were serving.
- The Residents looked forward to Vespers. The weekly gathering increased open sharing and deeper reflections.
- The Residents created an awesome Blog: www.bethanyhoh.wordpress.com
- All Vesper facilitators looked forward to coming back again to facilitate, several facilitated more than once.
- The Bethany House Community Garden is an amazing way for Residents to work together and serve the community at the same time.
- The total endorsement of New Brunswick Presbytery was a great joy.

9) Three things you would want someone to know about starting a house of hospitality.

- Funding: Secure seed money for possible renovations and program costs and then seek matching funders, so that the rental costs can be kept at a minimum given the low income that potential Residents will earn.
- Residents: Partner with local agencies that already hire and vet staff that will be serving in your area and needing low cost housing.
- Staff: A Chaplain/Coordinator is vital to overseeing the program and supporting the Residents. A maintenance staff person or a building committee is vital to continue overseeing the property.

10) Are there any other items or material that you would like to share with the group?

- We are willing to share all of our written materials.
- Visit the following links to see written materials already posted:
<http://www.presnb.org/> & www.bethanyhoh.wordpress.com

The Common House (Kyle Kooyers)

1) Briefly describe your program.

- The Common House consists of a small group of young adults dedicated to the transformation of lives through the fostering of Christian community and the pursuit of faithful living.
- Our vision is to live in Christian community to pursue the development of faithful living, ministry, and service. The Common House is a 12-month commitment to spiritual formation in Waynesburg and Greene County. This house will consist of five to ten young adults living in faith-based community for the sake of joining in Christ's restorative work.
- Core Values
 - Participating in Christ's *restorative work*
 - Developing a *depth of faith and an understanding of calling*
 - Establishing *intentional relationships both internally and externally*
 - Exhibiting a *model of Christian community*
 - Engaging in the *life and growth of Greene County*
- The structure of the Common House consists of two fundamental concepts, namely the fostering of Christian community and the pursuit of faithful living. These two activities ought to be the primary focus of all Common House members.
- Life as a part of the Common House is to be consistent with the gospel of Christ. To ensure dedication of ministry, the Common House will engage in discipleship. In order to accomplish this goal the members are to engage in the following:
 - Weekly study with Spiritual Director: (all house members)
 - Weekly Bible (all house members)
 - Weekly gatherings to foster internal community on Sunday evenings (all house members)
 - Meetings with individual mentors once a month
 - Active involvement in a local congregation
 - Take time for the sabbath (whether it is a day, or specific time(s) within each day)
 - This should be a time of retreat from vocational responsibilities, service, and house responsibilities
- One of the Common House's primary focuses is to provide restorative service to Greene County and surrounding areas. As such, the members need to regularly

engage in service to the community. Therefore, the members must remain accountable to this vision by completing the following:

- Active involvement in service to the community, either paid or unpaid.
 - Participation in 3 or more joint “House projects” in which all the participants serve together. This can involve partnering with existing groups (e.g. working several days at Habitat), or starting an independent project (e.g. putting on a community dinner).
- In the Common House, the members are committed to having a meal together once a week. Preparation and clean-up will alternate. A schedule will be created to assign various cooking, cleaning, and food/ living supply shopping responsibilities. The members will collaborate throughout the week to ensure that food is purchased responsibly for this meal and is available to the group.

2) Explain the steps it took to get started

- Chuck Baily (local Business man/Landlord), Dave Calvario (Dean of Students Waynesburg University) and Wayne Miesel began talking about the possibilities of starting a Christian based community house.
- In the Spring of 2011, a group of seniors at Waynesburg University began talking about starting an intentional Christian Community in Waynesburg.
- Chuck Baily volunteered one of his properties to be rented at a very reduced rate to the Community House project
- Dave Calvario worked with Wayne Miesel on applying for the Cousin’s Foundation Grant
- Group met with several community members and local experts of Community Development about the project and identified Noah McIntee as the initial Spiritual mentor for the House
- The Group of Students met weekly during their final semester to develop a Covenant/Order of living document that would help to govern year on of the house
- First group of residents moved into the house in the Fall of 2011

3) Describe Recruitment and Selection

Those who endured the process of developing a covenant and order of living were deemed worthy.... We joke about this, but there is some truth to it. Our order of living is the expectation for house membership. This is our best way of discerning whether or not an individual is right for the house and the house for the individual.

4) What Funding/Volunteer Support did you receive?

Funding & Donations

- | | |
|--|------------------------|
| 1) Cousins Foundation | \$10,000 |
| 2) Community Fund (paid by members) | \$200/Member/Month |
| | a. 150 Rent/Utilities |
| | b. 50 groceries/prgms. |
| 3) Housing Rent Reduction (In-Kind) | \$350/ Month |
| 4) Books (In Kind) | \$ 300 |
| 5) Curriculum and Spiritual Director (In Kind) | \$ 5,240 |
| 6) Waynesburg University Faculty/Staff:
Furniture and other household items | |

Church Members Volunteered to Host Meals

- 1) First Presbyterian Church of Waynesburg
- 2) Waynesburg Bible Chapel
- 3) Greene Community Church

Local Pastors, Church and Community leaders that have invested time/resources:

- 1) Rev. Skip Noftzger
- 2) Dr. Dave Calvario
- 3) Sarah Branstetter
- 4) Chuck Baily
- 5) Rev. Noah McIntee
- 6) Pastor Cathie Carpenter
- 7) Sister Audrey Quinn (Salvation Army)
- 8) Pastor Larry Douglas
- 9) Rev. Bill Sukolsky
- 10) Rev. Karen Sloan
- 11) Rev. Jim Ellison
- 12) Rev. Wayne Miesel

5) What are your rules for community life?

- In the Common House, each member is to find a form of either part or full time employment. When seeking out potential employment opportunities, we try to partner with organizations whose mission is aligned with the Common House as expressed in its Core Values.
- The Common House considers the physical property to be an opportunity for demonstrating good stewardship. Participants are therefore responsible for cleaning, upkeep, reporting any damages, participating in occasional workdays to improve the structure and appearance of the house, and yard care. Yard care includes keeping the grass at a reasonable height, clearing the sidewalks during the winter, pulling weeds, and picking up trash as necessary.

Floor Arrangements

- Bedrooms and bathrooms are separated by gender
- Guys and girls need to knock prior to entering opposite living quarters
- Housemates need to be sensitive and considerate of others' sleep needs

Guests/Visitation

- Each member looking to have guests stay overnight must explain 'who' and 'how long' and gain permission from the group
- Mixed company is not permitted overnight in gender-specific quarters
- Community members are responsible for their guests
- Noise level and activity is to be considerate of others
- Long-term guests (over 72 hours) require special consideration (financial compensation, scheduling, participation in community activities, eviction, etc.)

Drugs

The Common House prohibits the use, sale, purchase, transfer, or possession of any and all illegal drugs on the property. The Common House is tobacco free indoors. The front porch is a permissible area for tobacco with the consideration of the other house members.

Alcohol

- No alcohol consumed if there are underage individuals present
 - No one drinks alone (if you're the only one in the house, no alcohol is to be consumed)
 - Space limited for keeping alcohol in the house (it should be kept out of site)
 - All containers are to be cleaned up *immediately* after consumption
 - No drunkenness *on or off* house property
-
- Residents participate in shared meals and weekly Bible Study, Debrief, and Spiritual Formation class.

6) What programming have you had during the year?

- Vision of Living Retreat
- 2 House Just for Fun Retreats
- Focus of Ministry Dinner
- Weekly meeting with Spiritual Director
- Weekly Bible Study

- Weekly House Dinners / Debriefs
- Monthly Business Meeting

7) What were some of the challenges and how did you overcome them.

Over the past half year, the House of Hospitality project has dealt with several challenges. The first was difficulty in establishing an early internal community - that is to say, community between the members of the house. Expectations and commitments to work and service were pulling members away from quality “in house” time. As a result, the life of the community suffered. This was addressed through several meetings with program participants and facilitators, resulting in the revision of service expectations for the House (see below). House members were encouraged to invest in each others lives and support one another through regular times of prayer, fellowship, and activities. Through reading ‘community focused’ literature, the group was able to adopt the means necessary to communicate needs and frustrations to the group.

The surrounding community took a while to adjust to the group of young adults living out this project. At first, it was a lack of understanding what the program was or that it existed. Then it was an issue of the perceptions surrounding young people, males and females, living together. The program seemed to look little different than an off campus college house or fraternity. These misperceptions was largely helped through the members shoveling neighbors walks in the winter and hosting a community wide Christmas Party. Personally meeting neighbors, establishing relationships, and having people over to see the program and learn about the home was helpful in bridging this challenge. As a result, the house has made some good friends on our street and, in time, will build more relationships.

Additionally, about a month and a half into the project, the community suffered the departure of one of its members. This departure was surprising to some, but foreseeable to others, as the root problems were not well communicated and little could be done once the individual had voiced their desire to leave. This also raised the concern of not having a formalized exit procedure or a channel through which members of the house could vocalize concerns and process problems/frustrations with house mentors/facilitators. Therefore, the project participants discussed a formalized exit procedure, and found there needed to be formal communication with the advisory board before a member can exit the house. Also, house members need to address their issues and concerns with an individual mentor or house members when appropriate.

Additional clarity on roles of the advisory team as well as communicating its agenda with the members of the Common House became an underlying issue. Roles of each member of the advisory team, personal paradigms for the house and participants, shared views and personal views, how to keep everyone “invested” and on the same page, and regular meeting times for the advisory team became areas of concern. It was year one for everybody including the advisory team. There was overlap in the roles and at the outset, it was kind of fluid.

Next year we hope to make these roles more clear, and to have more communication with the advisory team and the house members.

Another challenge the House of Hospitality has faced is the lack of involvement with and from local congregations. The project needs the support of surrounding churches both in caring for the house members and advocating on behalf of the ministry as a whole. While the Host Church has fulfilled its obligations as fiscal administrator of the grant and acted as a support base for house members who attend, along with several other congregations, one of the house members has received little to no support from their church, largely due to presumptions and false perceptions of the project and its intentions. Furthermore, there have been limited times when house members and facilitators have been able to formally address congregations about the ministry. Over the coming year, the House will seek partnerships with several churches in the community, establishing a mutual advocacy and support base between the House and surrounding churches.

During our time of transition, we experienced some internal challenges. After admitting romantic feeling for another house member, one member moved out of the house until the other member, who was expected to leave the program after the first year, left. This created some tension within the group. Also, another house member had a hard time transitioning out of the House, and took a long time to decide if they were or were not going to stay for a second year. Furthermore, there was an unexpected death of a prospective member, who was going to move in to the house at the beginning of August. All of these things made transitions hard for the group, therefore we have slowly transitioned into the programs second year.

7) What were the joys and how wonderful were they?

8) Kyle's Happiest Moments from Common House Year One:

- Dan trying to cook Lambs and Clams... nuf said
- Dexter Nights with Dave and Dan... "it's the doctor"
- Biggest Loser Mornings with Dave. Jillian = Motivation for life
- 50's Fest and random House Car Cruise to Sonic and the Drive In... awkward movie / rain = good conversation time
- Hosting lunch for Habitat for Humanity Mission Trip over Thanksgiving and making a damn good ham in that freakin oven.
- Working with Brother Bob on those ridiculous recovery Bible workbook things. Totally worth it to see Dan run and hide like a small child every time Bob came over.
- Beer Sampling, Knock off Primantis Sandwiches, and Steeler Game on a Sunday Night.
- Scouting the Warrior Trail with Elise, Pam, and Steve Bauthier... yes the graveyard is the trail. It's the Look for the Yellow Dot Game!
- Helping to lead Campus retreat at the Moniger Shelter on the Warrior Trail with Pam and Dan...the hot chocolate loving dogs name was Dixie, Pam, and girls love bacon
- Dan and Pam coming to help/ support me preach at 1st Pres of Mason Town. Kidnapping Dan to Med express, leaving him there for shopping adventure at Gabriel Brothers. – Pam's man jacket, How to Get Married for Dan, and "We May Not Have It All Together" picture
- Hosting a Community wide Christmas Dinner, decorating, cooking, meeting all the neighbors, and hearing how they wanted to do more together

- Winter Retreat to the lake... row boat adventure cruises. Breaking the motor and rowing back with Dave and Dan. Holy Smokes we have a name or this thing!
- Road Trip with Dan and Halie to the Scotti's for the Superbowl. "I've always wanted to see the Capital building". Dan's parking lot meltdown at Taco Bell
- Everyone pitching in to help Dave with the 30hr. Famine... road kill surprise!
- Watching "Once Upon a Time" with Elise and Dan. Neeeeeehehehehe!
- Halie and Elise volunteering with me every month at the Franklin Township Pantry...God knows I could not handle the Baily Bunch alone!
- Sushi Night for my Birthday. Sakki. Sitting on the floor. My beautifully ghetto rigged Chinese Lantern.
- Helping Pam construct her Bio Swale Project... wood drill bits and glass do not mix well. "oh, you need a car for this road"
- Hosting dinner discussion with world renowned theologian and Philosopher David K. Naugle. All the help from everyone to prep the night before and the Day before –LIKE A BOSS
- Pam coming to rescue me and my food bank volunteers when my car sunk into the mud of backwoods Springhill Township.
- Coming to Pam's rescue a little over a week later when she was pulled over for bad brake lights in Morgantown... mouthful of Sweedish Fish = Little fowl abusing kids getting scolded by evil environmentalist Pam.
- Going to Pam's Fundraiser, dancing, helping to jack up the silent auction bids, and winning the Enlightened Cow.... Which I still owe \$40 for, my bad
- Watching the sunset with Dan, Pam, and Halie... reliving "hmmm, A. Horre...ha,Well that's unfortunate"
- Going with Pam and Elise to Dave's Softball Games and hanging out with all the different Church folks... Larry Douglas = continual state of priceless
- Working with Dave and Halie to help at John Thompson's various houses... get your scrape face on!
- Man night with Dave, Dan, and Captain America... hey, Elron is in this movie!
- Turtle races at Coache's with Dan, Halie, and Elise. . . and shots to determine who would lead Bible Study. Turtlely ridiculous walrus face from Halie.
- Talking with Dave on our night hike to the Cross at Jumonville. Late night snack/grocery Run with Halie, Elise, and Dan.
- The Winter Galla with Halie. Cleaning up with Albert, and Chuck.
 - Growing together as a community
 - Gave us a place to experience life as adults, while being strengthened by other Christians
 - Gained knowledge about community from Bonhoeffer and St Francis. Also learned about the importance of community through the scripture.
 - Gave us a sound bound when we are overwhelmed by the outside world, and its selfish nature
 - Helped us develop our character, and to become individuals who are respected in our community
 - Helped us become more aware of our community that we live in, and learned the best ways to invest and serve in that community.

9) Three things you would want someone to know about starting a house of hospitality.

- Establish clearly defined entrance and exit procedures. Have a game plan for handling transitions good, bad, ugly.
- Members should receive support in finding a site/job that aligns well with the core values of the house.
- (echo Karen) Staff: A Chaplain/Coordinator is vital to overseeing the program and supporting the Residents.

10) Are there any other items or material that you would like to share with the group?

Rev. Jack Barden, Vice President for Admissions at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, TX

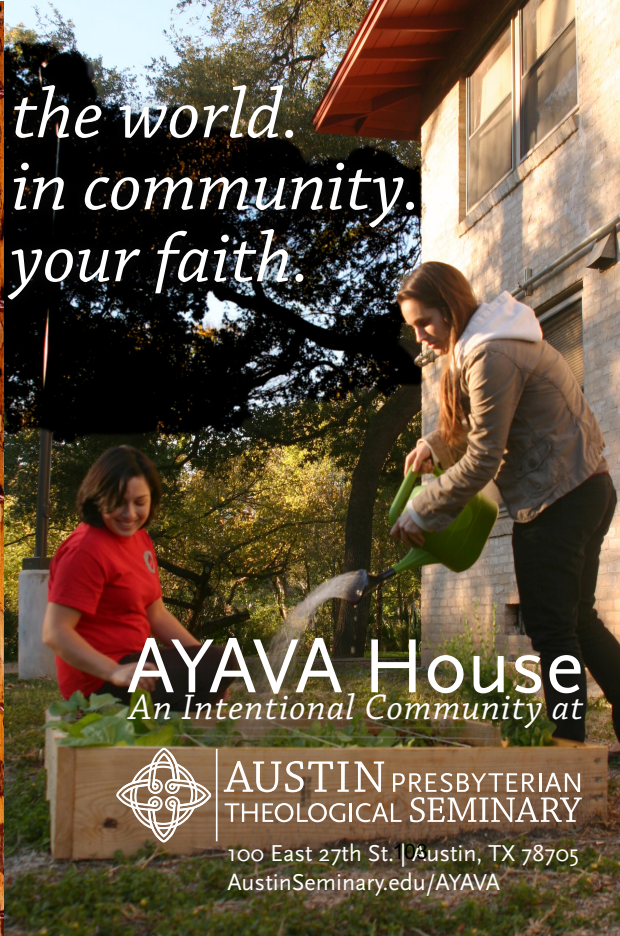
Name/Location of Hospitality House: AYAVA House (an acronym for Austin Young Adult Volunteer/AmeriCorps), located on the campus of the seminary, housing 9 participants in three apartments

Slide Content:

- AYAVA HOUSE at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary is an Intentional Community for young adults, who are engaged in programmatic service opportunities for the duration of at least 9 months.
- The following are principles that guide our discussion and lifestyle: vocational discernment, service to the community, theological reflection, engagement in spiritual practices, and simple living.
- There is a programmatic component to the experience that is tailored to fit around the group's work schedules. This includes (among other things) weekly group dinners, quarterly retreats, and weekly educational and cultural activities to undergird and expand upon participants' volunteer experiences.
- Topics of discussion and reflection throughout the year are participant directed and may involve issues such as environment and sustainability, poverty, gender, immigration, or whatever topics in which the group has an interest.
- Spiritual reflection and vocational discernment are key components of the living experience, so participants should be comfortable engaging in discussions that involve elements of faith and spirituality. Participants are not required to belong to a particular faith tradition or background. Participants are expected to be open-minded individuals with a general interest in a theological context for learning, living and growing.
- Participants are expected to commit to and actively participate in the program for 10 to 12 months depending on length of their volunteer service.
- Units are located on the Austin Seminary campus at 27th and Speedway, directly across from the University of Texas and in the heart of Central Austin
- Each participant will have their own bedroom in a three bedroom apartment. Living room, kitchen, and two bathrooms are shared spaces. Flat rate cost of rent is \$310 per month. This includes rent, wireless internet, utilities, and program costs.

Serve *the world.*
Live *in community.*
Grow *your faith.*

AYAVA House offers young adults spending a year of service in Austin the opportunity to live among a community engaged in spiritual practice and vocational discernment.



AYAVA House
An Intentional Community at



**AUSTIN PRESBYTERIAN
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

100 East 27th St. | Austin, TX 78705
AustinSeminary.edu/AYAVA

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