

Community of Christ

Yearning for God:

Discernment and Spiritual Practice



Discernment and Discipleship

Yearning

Discernment is about discovering God's yearning for us and our yearning for God. Yearning may be a strange word for us, but we know what it feels like. Yearning is what I feel when my husband, Dave, is away on extended work trips, and I long for his return. When my sister-in-law, Amy, was dying of cancer, I yearned for her healing. My body and spirit yearn for the beauty of the mountains when I have been away from them too long.

We can want pizza or cassava or chocolate or tortillas. But we yearn only for what touches our hearts and souls: home, joy, wholeness, healing, or peace. Yearning is a persistent hope that our deepest needs and desires will be realized. It is a tender, urgent longing arising from the depths of our beings.

Once I held a starving African baby in my arms. My heart ached for a different world, a different Africa, a different me. I longed for a more-generous and faithful me to help end the suffering of so many children. I yearned for the fading light in this child's eyes to stay alive; for his emaciated body to be nourished back to health.

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

God: The Great Weaver

God is the divine weaver, and shalom is the pattern God calls us to discern. Jesus embodied God's shalom for us. Early

every morning he spent time in solitude with God, the Great Weaver. The scriptures say these were times of prayer, times of openness to God's vision and vulnerability to God's love. Jesus discerned and surrendered to God's presence and purpose. He wore the pattern he received from God as a garment of wholeness and holiness everywhere he went. It was woven into his face and eyes, his skin and hands. It radiated from his heart. He embodied the pattern of shalom because in every moment he was open to the One who dreams and weaves shalom into creation.

Discernment: A Life Orientation for Followers of Jesus

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

Discerning disciples orient their lives to God through spiritual practices. Discernment cannot be separated from spiritual formation. Practices that shape us into the likeness of Christ form us spiritually. Spiritual practices are ways of becoming vulnerable to God and uncovering the deeper, beloved self Jesus sees in us.

Stripping Away the Layers

Most of us wear protective layers between ourselves and God. The layers come from the messages of family and culture, from religious, political, educational, and economic systems that form our identity and ideas. These powerful forces shape our values and beliefs, including our ideas about God and what God wants. Our human systems and cultures can be sources of goodness and beauty. Where they resist or contradict the wholeness of God's shalom, they stand in need of redemption and healing. In discernment our attachment to personal or cultural belief systems can become barriers that block our complete openness to God. They, too, must be released to God.



Authentic discernment happens from a place of “spiritual freedom.” Jesuit Priest John English says we are spiritually free when the love of Christ grasps us so completely that the desires of our hearts, our thoughts, and decisions are “oriented toward God” (www.jesuits.ca/orientations/glossary3.html). In *Discerning God’s Will Together*, authors Danny Morris and Charles Olsen lift up the idea of “shedding.” To “shed” we give up or lay aside anything that keeps us from seeking God’s will as our highest value. We take off the layers of our ego so we can receive what God longs to reveal.

The Spiritual Freedom of Holy Indifference

Spiritual freedom and “shedding” relate closely to holy indifference. The word “indifference” may be confusing. It seems to mean we don’t care what happens. But holy indifference does not mean that. It means we care so deeply about God’s truth and wholeness that we “seek to be open to God’s voice, as opposed to the other voices that speak to us, like the voices of others echoing from the past, the voices of friends, the voices of our culture” (Stephanie Lutz Allen, *Spiritual Discernment: Choosing Methodically with God at* www.cultivatemission.org/pdf/Spiritual%20Discernment%20Booklet_SLA.pdf).

Spiritual freedom and holy indifference are conditions reached through a transformation of our hearts. Allen says God cultivates these conditions in us when we ask for help and open ourselves to God’s grace. We grow in the attitude of holy indifference through prayerful listening and other spiritual practices.

Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) said our concerns must be left to rest in the heart, where we discern which outcome brings us “consolation” or “desolation.” Consolation confirms our movement toward God through feelings of peace, hope, compassion, and clarity. In desolation we may feel depressed, discouraged, drawn inside ourselves, and limited in our vision. Desolation helps us realize we are moving away from God and God’s call.

Discernment Processes for Decision-Making

Discernment for disciples is focused receptivity toward God’s will. Discernment also is a way to seek spiritual guidance for decisions in our personal lives or the body of Christ. We don’t always agree about God’s call or the vision of shalom. We disagree about which threads belong in God’s design. Discernment helps us distinguish what threads (decisions/directions) are faithful to God’s yearnings for shalom and what the pattern of Christ’s peace is to look like in our community.

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

Christian spirituality has guidelines for using discernment to address specific questions. This resource does not provide details of structured discernment models. The “Learn More” section on page 8 provides additional information on discernment models and materials.

Discerning and Weaving the Pattern of Shalom

The visionary longing for shalom flows from God’s being. It flows into the heart and spirit, mind and body of Jesus as he discerns and embodies the divine dream for creation. Through spiritual practice we open to the heart of Christ and the dream of God. We are drawn to pray as Jesus did in his early morning pattern of alone time with God. We open to Christ’s constant, passionate awareness of God’s call and will. Daily spiritual practice is our way of connecting our life pattern with the Divine Weaver. This was the way of Jesus. It must be our way of being shaped, woven, and transformed.

Through spiritual disciplines of attention and listening, we discern our yearning for God and our call to help create shalom. We see more clearly the threads and colors of Christ’s peace. We learn to distinguish and choose the healing patterns of shalom God invites us to weave into our lives. Deep discernment of God’s dream of justice and beauty for creation comes from deep spiritual formation. Deepening our spiritual life and practice allows God to shape us as prophetic people of Christ’s peace.

How to Use this Resource

This resource is a beginning guide to discernment as a spiritual attitude and activity for faithful disciples. We invite you to use the principles and practices in this resource and learn more through the suggested discernment models and materials on page 8.

Mission-center presidents and pastors can support widespread discernment by making this resource available in local areas. Inform members of the resource and how to access it on the church Web site, www.CofChrist.org/discernment. Provide copies for interested members who do not have Web access. Encourage use of the resource through:

- **Individual discernment**—Urge members to engage in solitude and spiritual practice to deepen discipleship and discernment.
- **Christian education**—Adults, young adults, and mature youth can study the discernment material. Include at least one spiritual practice during each class.
- **Discernment groups**—Organize small groups to learn about discernment by using this and other resources (especially for priesthood and leadership teams).
- **Worship and prayer services**—Include spiritual practice and discernment experiences at congregational and mission-center gatherings.
- **Options for practice**—Consider repeating one spiritual practice for one week; then begin a new practice. Or try a different practice each day and repeat the cycle of practices on a weekly basis.
- **Covenant Discipleship Groups**—This small-group ministry incorporates spiritual practice and discernment for mission. Materials and training are at www.CofChrist.org/cdg.
- **Daily Bread 2010: 365 Days of Discipleship Formation**—Buy and use this book as a guide to daily spiritual practice (www.HeraldHouse.org).

Spiritual Practices for the Discerning Disciple

Solitude: Create Sacred Time and Space

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

Group activity: Include a "prayer closet" or "wilderness time" in reunion and camp schedules with the invitation for people to spend time in solitude with God.

Keep a Spiritual Journal

Journaling helps us record prayers, feelings, questions, experiences, thoughts, insights, images, dreams, and memories. God can "speak" to us in any and all of these ways. Writing them becomes part of the conversation with God. Surprising insights can come through the act of writing. Journals are private, so we can be completely honest with God and ourselves. Buy a small journal or notebook or use any paper you can find. Write in your journal as a daily spiritual practice or when you

have a specific question, experience, prayer, or scripture you want to record.



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Gather Information: Learn and Let Go

To discern we must be willing to learn. We give up our answers to become sincere seekers of God's wisdom. For a particular issue or question we gather information.

Study, research, read, and check the Internet. Gather facts from reliable sources.

Look at all sides of the issue rather than only information that supports our view.

Learn all we can about the perspectives of those who hold different opinions. Look for connecting links and common ground.

Experiment with creating lists of pros (reasons for the idea) and cons (reasons against the idea). Pray over these lists and discuss with wise, open-minded friends.

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

Group activity: For discernment in community, assign people to gather information on all aspects of the issue. Share ideas using good listening skills. Invite group members to take a "letting go" walk. Share experiences. Pray together.

The Prayer of Examen: Examination of Awareness

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

Become silent and turn your attention toward God. Humbly ask God to help you remember your day clearly and honestly (period of silence).

Express thanks for the many blessings of life and this day (prayer pause).

Review your day with an awareness of God's presence. Think over your activities, conversations, thoughts, and feelings. When or where did you recognize God? When did you act in a Christ-like way? When did you fail to act in a Christ-like way (period of silent reflection)?

Let God's forgiving love rest on you and the actions and words of the day (pause).

Release the day to God's grace and turn toward tomorrow. Set your intention to be more aware of God's presence and to live the day more as Jesus would (silence).

End your prayer with gratitude for the gift of this day and commit to become more conscious of God's activity and presence in future days.

Journaling helps with this prayer. What do you notice each day or over a period of time? In what ways are you more aware of God in your thoughts and experiences? What do you discern about your questions and God's call to you?

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

For more information and versions of this prayer see: *Daily Bread 2010* or www.CofChrist.org/discernment.

Noticing and Paying Attention

Distractions fill ordinary life. Work, family, church, phones, television, computers, and social and sports events all demand attention. Two choices help us stay centered in God. Start with a conscious decision to notice God in the details, events, and people of our day. Second, create daily quiet times for paying attention to God in specific ways.

Notice the Gifts of the Day

God is persistently present. Ordinary events and people can reveal God when we look for signs of the divine. Offer God your heart's questions and pray to be open to the gifts and teachers who come to you this day. Notice insights that come through a thought, an image, an inner voice, or a wise message from an adult or child who crosses your path as a teacher. Be open to objects, symbols, events, or coincidences that capture your attention. What gift of understanding or healing might be found in a flock of birds, a quiet breeze, a discarded object, a piece of art?

Group activity: Practice for a day or week and then share experiences. (More on "Noticing" at www.CofChrist.org/discernment)

Walking in Nature

Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) said, "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God." The natural world is a revelation of God. Nature can calm, quiet, and heal us. It is a good place to discern God's presence and wisdom.

Choose a time and place to walk in a quiet natural setting. If you live in a city, find a park or a quiet street. Allow twenty minutes or longer for walking.

Let go of any discernment questions during your walk. Turn your questions over to God and trust God to be in and around you as you walk.

Ask God to give you eyes to see and ears to hear signs of God.

Begin walking with reverence and gratitude.

Stop and spend time if a plant, leaf, insect, flower, cloud, tree, animal, bird, stone, or pool of water draws your attention. Touch, smell, look, and listen. See if it has something to teach you. How does this natural object make you more aware of God and yourself? What insights come to you?

Group activity: Ask your group to walk with the instructions above. Journal and share.

Walking the labyrinth is a powerful discernment practice. Please see www.CofChrist.org/discernment.

Praying with Scripture

The witness of scripture is central to our life of discipleship. In discernment it helps to reflect and pray with scripture rather than debate or look for one "right" interpretation. The Christian practices of "sacred reading" and "entering a scripture passage" can help us encounter God through scripture.

Sacred Reading (*lectio divina*)

This practice invites us to let God's word soak into mind, emotions, body, and spirit through repeated reflective reading. Read a selected scripture verse or short passage at least four times. **First:** Read for understanding (**lectio**) and spend time in silence reflecting on the meaning of this text. **Second:** Read for deeper comprehension and reflective questioning (**meditatio**). What is the purpose of this text? What is being said and why? **Third:** Read the text again and pray (**oratio**) about emotions, personal applications, or invitations you perceive. **Fourth:** Read the text and enter a period of receptive

silence (**contemplatio**). Rest in God's presence. Say a grateful amen. (More on lectio divina and group lectio divina at www.CofChrist.org/discernment.)

Entering a Scripture Passage (Ignatian Scripture Meditation)

- This practice from St. Ignatius (1491–1556) helps scripture texts come alive. Using the gift of imagination, we become part of the scene as though we were a character in the story. During discernment it is important to look at our choices in the light of Jesus' teachings and example. Reading and imagining the events of Jesus' life offer excellent guidance for our discipleship and discernment questions. This is a practice for individual or group use.
- Choose a scripture story from the life of Jesus that seems to speak to your needs. It is best if someone can read this to you while you listen with your eyes closed. If this is not possible, read the passage several times. Then begin to see, hear, feel it.
- Sit quietly. Say a silent prayer asking for the spirit of Christ to be with you.
- Read the scripture slowly and prayerfully, as if hearing it for the first time.
- Read the scripture again. What details, descriptions, images, or words stand out?
- Close your eyes and slow your breathing. Try to imagine the story. Visualize it taking place. What does the setting look like? What time of day is it? What is the weather like? Use all your senses to imagine landscape, buildings, colors, odors, voices, actions, feelings. Try to feel as though you are part of the story, even if you cannot see clear images.
- As the story unfolds in your mind, imagine you are a character or an observer in the scene. Who do you become? How do you feel and react?
- Imagine becoming the person Jesus talks with, heals, or touches in the story. What happens as Jesus looks at you, speaks with you, or touches you?
- Spend time in this imaginary interaction with Jesus. What does he say and do? What do you say and do? What do you feel and realize?
- Say thank you to Christ and let the scene fade from your mind. Continue to listen and be prayerful. What did you learn about yourself, this scripture, and Jesus? Journal about insights and feelings.

Group activity: Invite sharing of responses.

Body Prayer

As a faith tradition, we believe in the inseparable connection between body and spirit. When our intentions are to

honor and open to God, our bodies become instruments of the Spirit that help us perceive God's desires and purposes.

Because body and spirit are connected closely, the body can help us become calm and centered during spiritual practices. When we sit still, relax our muscles, and slow our breathing, we become more receptive to spiritual practices. During quiet prayer and meditation the patterns produced by the brain's activity change to allow deeper reflection and spiritual insight. Involving our bodies can deepen discernment.

The body can be our helper and friend during discernment. Emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical states are tied together. The body's messages and reactions are a source of wisdom and insight. For body-related discernment see www.CofChrist.org/discernment.



The body can be our helper and friend during discernment.



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

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

- **First prayer posture:** Create a cup or bowl with your hands.
- **Meditation (one to two minutes) with first prayer phrase:** *God, the eternal Creator weeps...* Imagine your bowl catching God's tears. Be aware of God's tears for creation and the human family. Be aware of God's tears for you.
- **Closing gesture:** Bring your cupped hands over your head and empty the bowl of God's tears over yourself. Let God's tears anoint and bring you healing.
- **Second prayer posture:** Create a large circle with your arms as if hugging someone.
- **Meditation (one minute) with the second prayer phrase:** *God yearns to draw you close so that (your) wounds may be healed.* Imagine God embracing you and healing your wounds.
- **Closing gesture:** Bring hands over your heart; sense God drawing you closer.

- **Third prayer posture:** Create your own prayer movement or posture.
- **Meditation with the third prayer phrase:** *Be vulnerable to divine grace* as you take on a simple body posture that expresses your desire to be vulnerable to God. Perhaps you want to raise your arms and face toward God, to kneel or bow. Hold this posture briefly. Let God move into heart, mind, and body with healing grace.

Closing gesture: With palms together, bow and say, “Thank you” and “Amen.”

Surrendering Yourself and the Day to God (for Individuals or Groups)

In this prayer you will place your hands on different parts of your body as you open yourself to God and the Spirit of Christ. Ask God to bless your hands as instruments of healing now and throughout the day. Be aware of God’s light and blessing flowing to you as you offer yourself to God. Use the prayer phrases suggested or create your own.

With hands on your head pray: *May my thoughts be your thoughts, Creator. Bless me with the mind of Christ as I live this day.*

With hands on or over your face and eyes pray: *God, may my vision be your vision. Let me see with the eyes of Christ and look with love on all I see.*

With hands on or over your ears, pray: *Creator, open my ears to sounds of beauty and suffering. May I hear your voice in the sounds that come to my ears this day.*

With hands over your throat, pray: *God, I offer you my voice and words. Today may all the sounds of my voice come from you and express your love and truth.*

With hands over your heart, pray: *Make my heart one with your heart, O God. May your love flow from my heart to all I meet today.*

Additional discernment prayer: With hands open in front of you, pray: *God, I offer you the questions and decisions in my life. May your love and wisdom be in all I hear, see, think, and feel to bring about your wholeness and truth.*

Holding in the Light

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

already knows the need. Use this prayer to hold discernment questions or other healing needs in God’s light.

Group activity: Sit in a circle. You may wish to light a candle.



Listening is the most important practice in discernment



Listening Prayers

Listening is the most important practice in discernment. It is the beginning of the true humility and wisdom that opens us to God’s call. Contemplative prayer is a listening practice that centers us on the presence of the divine. To pray this way, we use our breath and a prayer word or phrase to focus on God.

Centering Prayer

This silent prayer invites us to be still and rest in God (begin with five minutes and go up to twenty). Close your eyes, breathe slowly, and let God become the center of your attention. Listen for a prayer word that expresses your intention to be open to God. Silently repeat the word each time you breathe out. Release the word when you feel deeply centered in the presence of God. If other thoughts distract you, come back to God by returning to your prayer word. End with a word of gratitude. Centering prayer is a way of saying, “Here I am, God. Let your way be formed in me.” For additional descriptions of centering prayer see *Daily Bread 2010* and www.CofChrist.org/discernment.

The Jesus Prayer

This prayer is an ancient spiritual practice from Orthodox Christianity. It is a way of connecting with the gracious spirit of Christ as we ask to receive his mercy. The prayer comes from the scripture of the blind man calling Jesus to heal him. Silently enter prayer and let your breath become slow and even. Greet God and then take up the prayer phrase: *Lord, Jesus Christ* (as you breathe in) ... *have mercy on me* (as you breathe out). Prayerfully repeat these words for five to ten minutes. Breathe the presence of Christ into your mind, heart, and body. Be transformed as you receive the compassionate, peaceful heart of Jesus. For more on the Jesus Prayer see www.CofChrist.org/discernment.

Breath Prayers

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

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

- Be still and know—that I *am* God (46:10 KJV).
- We are (I am) the clay—you are the potter (Isaiah 64:8 NIV).
- Create in me—a clean heart, O God (Psalm 51:10 IV).
- Wake my spirit—clear my sight (Hymns of the Saints, 281).
- Charity is—the pure love of Christ (Moroni 7:52, Book of Mormon RAV).
- The light of God—is in all things (Doctrine and Covenants 85:3b adapted).
- Peace—be with you (Doctrine and Covenants 81:6c).
- ^a Let the Spirit—breathe (Doctrine and Covenants 162:2e).
- Jesus Christ—God's shalom (Doctrine and Covenants 163:2a adapted).
- Become a sanctuary—of Christ's peace (Doctrine and Covenants 163:8c).
- You are loved—with an everlasting love (Doctrine and Covenants 163:10a).
- God yearns—to draw you close (Doctrine and Covenants 163:10a).

- Be vulnerable—to divine grace (Doctrine and Covenants 163:10b).

Group activity: Ask members to choose a breath prayer and pray for ten to twenty minutes. Invite journaling and/or oral sharing of responses to the prayer. For additional information about breath prayer see

www.christiansoulcare.com/spiritualdisciplinespiritualdisciplinebreathprayers.htm.

Learn More about Discernment

Additional information, articles, and spiritual practices related to discernment can be found at www.CofChrist.org/discernment.

Recommended Books on Discernment:

- *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* by Elizabeth Liebert, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. This text offers seven steps of discernment that include seeking "spiritual freedom" (see page 3), becoming clear and naming the exact question, gathering information, praying and reflecting, coming to a tentative decision, confirming the decision with God and the community, and reviewing the discernment process for integrity.
- *Discerning God's Will Together: a Spiritual Practice for the Church* by Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, Upper Room Books, 1997. This book describes a ten-step process for discernment in faith communities. It includes activities like framing, grounding, shedding, rooting, listening, and exploring.
- *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* by Margaret Silf, Loyola Press, 1999. The book explores discernment principles developed by St. Ignatius.

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