

# **PRESBYTERY DISCERNMENT TEAM**

*The process of discovering God's call*

*For Inquirers and Candidates*

*Committees on Preparation For Ministry*

*Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

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## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

This resource is provided to the Committee on Preparation For Ministry of the presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As you join in the sacred journey of working in the lives of Inquirers and Candidates and as together the church discerns how God is calling each individual, it is our hope that this resource may be of assistance. We believe that God calls each person to ministry, some as laypersons, some as deacons, some as elders and some as Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

There are many Inquirers and Candidates who pass through the processes of preparation with little or no difficulty. Their sense of call is clear to them, to the session and to CPM. The reports from Career Assessment programs, mentors, spiritual directors, the seminary, the standardized tests for ordination, and the consultations with CPM all affirm this person's call to ministry and even to a specific form of ministry. After completing their theological education, they quickly receive a call and move forward to serve the church and Jesus Christ in effective ways. All of these reports and processes are a form of discerning, and there may not be a necessity for additional discernment for them to move forward toward ordination.

Every CPM faces a more challenging task with some persons who are truly struggling with their sense of call or one or more requirements along the path. It is at those times that this resource may be of particular help. Some of these may be:

- ***Entrance:*** Should this person begin the process?
- ***Transition:*** Moving from Inquirer to Candidate.
- ***Field Education and/or Internship***
- ***Final Assessment***
- ***First Call:*** What particular type of ministry should I pursue?

Discernment is an ancient process that the church has used at those special turning points in the life of some of those entrusted to its care and oversight. Although there are many helpful models available (some listed in chapter 7 -*Resources*), we have prepared these materials particularly for use by a Committee on Preparation For Ministry.

Discernment is a process, not an event. It is a model incorporating biblical passages, prayer and listening to the quiet voice of God that individuals and groups may use to discover, to judge or decide what God might be calling them to be and to do. It is often associated with the call of God to a particular person or group.

Frederick Buechner in *Wishful Thinking* says: "The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." The biblical concept of calling is a discovering (discernment) of God's call to faithfulness for persons and for the groups.

Discernment is a process of worship, prayer and meditation (*Lectio Divina*) of a passage of Scripture, and listening that may lead a group to discover the movement of the spirit. This model is closely related to the Quaker "Clearness Committee." Although one person may do discernment alone, the community of faith is the basis for discernment in this model.

In the spring of 2000 a Design Team met at the Heartland Presbyterian Center in Kansas City under the auspices of the Office of Resourcing Committees on Preparation For Ministry of the National Ministries Division of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The members of the Design Team are:

- The Rev. Sue F. Berry, presently serving as Associate General Presbyter, National Capital Presbytery.
- The Rev. Garnett Foster, presently serving on the faculty of Louisville Theological Seminary.
- Elder Evelyn Hwang, presently serving as Associate, Resourcing Committees on Preparation For Ministry, NMD of the General Assembly.
- The Rev. Julie Ann Johnson, presently serving on the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary.
- The Rev. Timothy F. Jones, presently serving as Executive Presbyter, Beaver Butler Presbytery.
- The Rev. Charles Marks, Jr., presently serving on the faculty of San Francisco Theological Seminary.
- Elder Mary Elva Deloteus Smith, presently serving as Interim Executive, San Diego Presbytery.

It is with gratefulness to Almighty God that we share this resource with you and give you permission to duplicate materials that may be helpful.

## THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the processes developed over the years for preparing for various forms of ministry are shaped and informed by Scripture, the Book of Confessions, and by our Reformed Theology. They all attest to God's call to both individuals and institutions to be about the work of building God's kingdom. Presbyterians accomplish this through discipleship to Jesus Christ and the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately many decisions in the life of the church are made through methods not informed by or shaped by our Reformed Theology. When faced with an important decision, particularly the call of a particular person, we fail to draw on the biblical and historical resources that have sustained and built up the church through the ages. The process for moving toward ordination requires extensive testing, theological training and many decisions by the individual and a variety of groups. In an attempt to meet deadlines and to work with many persons, we pray for God's Holy Spirit to guide and direct us. But in the rush to make many decisions affecting the lives of many individuals, we revert to argument, persuasion and any other method that may convince others that what I think is the only right answer. There is little evidence that we ordinarily take the time and effort to listen to God, to submit to the authority of Jesus Christ, or to be guided by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Reformed Theology and polity are not based on argument, persuasion or even Robert's Rules of Order. In the early chapters of the Book of Order we find these statements:

- "All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who...set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named..."
- "It belongs to Christ alone to rule, to teach, to call, and to use the Church as he wills, exercising his authority by the ministry of women and men..."
- "Christ gives to his Church its faith and life, its unity and mission, its officers and ordinances...In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."  
(Book of Order, G-1.0100 a, b, c).

Romans 12:2 (NRSV) says "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good..."

In the Bible, "discernment" is the English word used for two Greek words:

- a) *Diakrisis*, which means "through crisis". The root meaning of crisis is "to sift, to separate or to cut." A crisis is a turning point, a decisive or critical time. Only the last definition is "a time of great danger or

trouble.” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1986).

- b) *Diakrino*, which means "to judge or decide through." Discernment is a process of deciding through or over time, not an event. Decision-making is often an event rather than a process. If something is important, for example a person’s response to God’s call in Jesus Christ, we need to take time in deciding it.

For Committees on Preparation For Ministry, discernment is a process to make judgments or decisions through a turning point in an individual’s life when that person has indicated an interest in responding to God’s call in Jesus Christ to prepare for a form of ministry. It is a faith process that the individual and those charged with oversight of that person might use to discover, to judge, to decide what God might be calling this person to become or to do.

Discernment is one method among many that a CPM may use in helping persons to discover what God is calling a person to be and do. It takes seriously the place of the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we seek to be faithful disciples. It is a process that is consistent with:

- a) Biblical methods of decision-making (see especially Acts 15).
- b) The Reformed understanding that God in Jesus Christ is Lord of the church and Lord of our lives.
- c) The principles set forth in our Book of Order.

# ASSUMPTIONS

## 1. *The Committee on Preparation For Ministry:*

- Is not seeking to solve a problem, but is willing to be open with an individual to discover together how God might be calling this person to ministry.
- Is willing to take the time (7 hours or more) to pray, to meditate and be open to the leading of the Spirit in this person's life rather than to just take a vote.
- Is willing to admit that it must be in a listening mode with the person and with God before some decisions can be made.
- Is willing to provide training for those who will lead discernment and for members who will participate in discernments.

## 2. *Preparation for discernment:*

- Ordinarily, the Inquirer or Candidate should initiate discernment and select those who will do the discernment. (See Discernment Team below.)
- Information will be sent out ahead of time to those on the Discernment Team about the process, expectations and time commitments required. This should occur 6 to 8 weeks prior to the time of the discernment.
- A safe and appropriate environment should be provided for the discernment. It should be welcoming, comfortable, and without distractions. Conference and retreat centers are often better than church buildings for this purpose.
- The Inquirer or Candidate should pick a Scripture passage that speaks to the issue for discernment. This will be used in the opening worship and for the praying with Scripture time during discernment.

## 3. *Discernment Team:*

- The Preparation For Ministry Committee may suggest a list of persons from a variety of categories from which the Discernment Team will be chosen. (See next chapter).
- The leader of the Discernment Team should be chosen by CPM in consultation with the person for whom the discernment is taking place.
- The Team should consist of 6-8 persons. This number provides for active participation of all as well as for some diversity.
- Cultural and ethnic sensitivity is essential. The Team should consist of persons who understand as well as know the culture and ethnicity of the person for whom the discernment is being done.

## 4. *Stating the Issue:*

- Discernment works best when there is only one, clear, concise issue before the group.
- It is the responsibility of the CPM and the person to state the issue to be discerned to the Discernment Team.

- This issue should be clearly communicated to the Team prior to the discernment and all members of the Team need to agree that this is the only issue that will be before them.
- The elements of the discernment: worship, Scripture and prayer time should focus on the stated issue.

**5. *The Discernment:***

- Sufficient time should be provided for getting to know one another and for community building. Ideally this could happen on an overnight experience.
- Arrangements for meals and snacks should be made so that Team members are not required to be involved in preparation, serving and clean up.
- If Team members need training in “Listening Prayer” or “Lectio Divina,” time should be provided prior to the discernment. Examples of these prayer forms can be found in Chapter Seven: Resources. The Bibliography also provides other resources that may be helpful.
- The leader needs to be flexible and open to the flow of the group. This person should prepare the worship and the opening and closing of the time as well as provide for prayer throughout the process.
- One person at a time should share reflections, thoughts and feelings as the discernment progresses. Rather than going around the circle, people should be invited to share as they feel moved by the spirit. Comments should be positive and constructive and shared in a loving manner. This is a time of affirmation for the person for whom the discernment is taking place.
- Comments should be written on newsprint so all can see. These can be given to the person for whom discernment is taking place at the end of the process.



## IDENTIFYING A DISCERNMENT TEAM

One of the most important tasks for a helpful discernment to take place is the selection of the Discernment Team. The Inquirer or Candidate in consultation with CPM or a Discernment Team leader should select those who will serve. The CPM has the final responsibility for recommendations affecting Inquirers and Candidates, however a Discernment Team may provide helpful guidance and information for CPM.

The following suggestions are offered to assist the CPM and the Inquirer or Candidate in selecting persons to serve in this important task.

- **Team Members:** CPM may recommend to the Inquirer or Candidate that persons be selected from the following categories for the Discernment Team: spouse; session liaison; at least two CPM members including the person assigned to this individual; the person's pastor and spiritual director; colleagues or friends; and church members who have worked with the person. Knowledge of and experiences with the person are important for a helpful discernment.
- **Team Leader:** Normally a CPM member or Presbytery staff person serves in this capacity. It should be someone who has participated in discernment, is open to the process, and is a person of prayer and has listening and group process skills. Persons trained as spiritual directors often make good discernment team leaders.
- **Gifts Needed in Team Members:**
  1. **Openness:** Members of the Discernment Team must be willing to be open to discerning God's will for this person rather than coming to fix a problem or provide a definitive response to the individual's concern. They should believe that God can and will lead the group.
  2. **Prayer:** Discernment Team members should be willing to commit to a time of prayer before the meeting, and be familiar with various forms of prayer or open to learning them.
  3. **Pro-Active:** Members should be people who are pro-active. They need to focus on possibilities, alternatives, options, gifts and strengths.
  4. **Faith Community:** Members need to be willing to enter into a community of faith for the Inquirer or Candidate with others whom they may not know. They should obviously be Christians who take seriously the call of God to this person.

## A SUGGESTED MODEL

The suggested model (found on page 9) is based on a one-day discernment for an individual. It has been used with a variety of Inquirers, Candidates and Ministers of Word and Sacrament to assist them in discerning how God might be calling them at the present or for the future.

The CPM and the Discernment Team leader may be open to increasing the amount of time for a particular discernment. Those of us who have had experience with a variety of discernments have discovered that more time together can result in a more helpful discernment. This is particularly true if Discernment Team members do not know each other. The building of a team, a community of faith, is essential to discernments.

An effective time frame might include meeting the night before the discernment for supper, worship, prayer and community building. This allows the members time to unwind from the concerns of the past week, move into a time of openness and relaxation. It also provides more time the night before to do any training of prayer forms for those who might not be familiar with them.

However, the Design Team for this project recognizes that members of CPM as well as those involved in discernments are very busy people. It may not be possible for them to set aside two days for this purpose. Although we urge you to take the needed time, we have provided a model that may be done in one day.

In some rare cases, discernment does take place in just a few hours together. If that should occur, the Discernment Team leader may suggest shortening the time spent together. This should be done with the concurrence of the Inquirer or Candidate as well as by consensus of the Team.

There are other cases in which a clear discernment does not occur in the time allotted. In such cases, we recommend that the Team select another discernment time. If another discernment time is selected, it is most helpful if the same Team can be present. Members should spend the intervening time in daily prayer asking for God's guidance and direction as they prepare to meet again.

If the Team is not able or willing to select another time for discernment, they may choose to refer the issue back to CPM for it to decide by other means. The Team, CPM or the Inquirer or Candidate should not interpret this to mean that the process has failed. Sometimes decisions are made most effectively by means other than discernment.

*Suggested Schedule for a one day event:*

- 9:00 a.m.      Gathering: Each person is asked to give their name and the context in which they know the person we are discerning for this day.
- 9:25 a.m.      Morning Prayer: The Scripture selected by the Inquirer or candidate is used. Passages dealing with the call of Abraham, Moses, one of the prophets, Jesus, the disciples or Paul may be used.
- 9:45 a.m.      Explanation: The Team leader explains the process for the day and answers any questions.
- 9:50 am.      Prayer: Each person spends time in silence, reflecting on the passage, praying using the Listening prayer model or “Lectio Divina” and then listing 2-5 gifts of the person.
- 10:45 am.      Plenary: Each shares the list of gifts. The Inquirer or Candidate shares last. No negative comments are permitted. Each person makes notes of what others said and the Team leader makes a list of gifts on newsprint for all to see.
- 11:30 am.      Silence: Team members reflect on what was heard. In this prayer time each person is asked to select no more than four gifts that were most evident in the person.
- Noon            Noon Prayer and Lunch
- 1:00 pm.      Prayer and silence Each person is asked to pray again in a listening fashion for a response to the issue chosen for discernment and based on the three to four gifts. What is God calling this person to be/do in relation to the issue for discernment?
- 2:00 pm.      Gathering. Each person shares responses discerned during the quiet time. Often the Inquirer or Candidate will feel that this is adequate. If the person desires more clarity, the 1:00 period would be repeated to limit the number of choices further.
- 3:15 pm.      Closing worship: A time to give thanks for God's grace. This time should include specific prayers for the Inquirer or Candidate and for whatever guidance God has provided. The person may be placed in the center of group. Each Team member may lay hands on her/him and offer a prayer. A sign of Christ's peace is an appropriate way to conclude.

## Frequently Asked Questions

1. *What if we have so many under care we don't have time to do discernment?*

If members of CPM are not willing or able to commit the time to use this process, then we recommend that you use other means to make these important decisions in the life of your Inquirers or Candidates. This process is offered to those who seriously want to use biblical and reformed processes for decision-making.

2. *How can we train Discernment leaders and teams? We don't have anyone familiar with the process?*

The Design Team is willing to help a CPM within their general geographical area. There are also persons trained through the office of Spiritual Formation of the General Assembly, persons trained in Spiritual Formation and/or Direction throughout the U.S. who can be of assistance in training. We have tried to make this process as simple as possible, believing that women and men of faith and prayer can use this effectively without extensive training.

3. *What worship resources are available that we can use in a discernment process?*

Worship is essential to the process. A "Daily Prayer" format, such as Morning or Evening Prayer is one way to begin. A typical worship for the beginning and ending of the discernment can be found in Chapter Seven: Resources.

4. *How do we teach the Discernment Team to do "Listening Prayer" or "Lectio Divina"?*

Examples of both of these prayer forms are found in Chapter Seven: Resources. If persons in the group have not had experience with these forms of prayer, it is highly recommended that sufficient time be spent "practicing" the prayer form. These prayers forms might be incorporated into meetings of your CPM from time to time as a way of introducing them in your presbytery.

5. *The time for praying seems to be very long. Do we need to take so much time?*

Yes! The purpose of a longer time for prayer is to allow the Bible passage and the Spirit to speak to each individual. We cannot hear God if we don't take time to listen. Thirty to forty-five minutes is usually sufficient for this purpose. The more a person prays with Scripture, the more they are comfortable with it. People who are primarily thinkers will relate to Scripture in thoughts, ideas and words. People who are more sensory will relate in images, feelings and relations. People should reflect in terms most comfortable for them.

6. ***What do we do if someone wants to discuss or argue with another person's observations during the plenary times?***

The Team leader should give clear directions at the beginning of each plenary. The group is not together to debate but rather to accept each suggestion without comment, discussion, support or disagreement. The Team leader should place each suggestion on newsprint so that all can see. It is important to get many ideas, not just a few. This prevents polarization of the group. Keep asking for additional comments until all suggestions have been recorded. If two people make the same suggestion it is not necessary to list it twice. The group is not voting on the most important selection.

7. ***Should we have more prayer times than those outlined in the suggested model?***

Yes. The group should spend a few minutes in prayer, thanking God for each suggestion and for each person in the group whenever it seems appropriate. Prayer time can be either silent or spoken, depending on how comfortable the group is with shared and spoken prayer. Sometimes discernment takes place during this process.

8. ***How do we know when a discernment has happened if we don't vote?***

This is probably the most important question of all. Discernment that a particular suggestion is the "right one" does not happen by consensus or voting. The only way to describe it is that the group simply knows that this is the way to move. It is a group "Ah Ha," a nodding of heads, a Kairos moment for everyone. The suggestion that ends up being the right one often comes from the unexpected person or persons. The discernment comes from the heart, from feelings, intuitions, or the still small voice that speaks in the silence. It may not come from reason or intellect. It is the Spirit moving the group, rather than the group moving the Spirit. You will know when God speaks through the community!

9. ***What do we do if discernment does not happen?***

If discernment does not happen during the first reflection time, the Team leader may ask everyone to prayerfully reflect on each alternative during a second quiet time of thirty to forty-five minutes. Ask them to choose the one alternative that seems most appropriate and to give a reason for supporting it. When the group reconvenes, each person shares the alternative they believe is the best and why it was chosen. If discernment has not occurred, it may be necessary to give it more time. This may require leaving the matter alone for a time: a few hours if you are on retreat, or a week or a month if you are using another setting. Some discernment happens in an hour or two; others take months. The time between the group discernment can be used for individuals to continue in silent, listening prayer daily.

## Resources

### 1. A Listening Prayer Model

Psalm 62:1 says: “For God alone my soul waits in silence.”

Listening prayer is also called contemplative prayer.

It is:

- Loving attentiveness to God
- Talk recedes into the background.
- Feelings and images move to the foreground.
- It is an experience of the heart as much as of the head.
- In the words of John 15: “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

There are three basic steps or movements to Listening Prayer:

#### a) Recollection

- Letting go of all distractions around us until we are truly present to ourselves and to God.
- Sitting comfortably and slowly letting tension and anxiety drop away.
- Becoming aware that God is present in the room. If distractions arise, simply lift them up to God and leave them with God.
- Be patient with yourself. This is like wasting time with God.

#### b) Prayer of Quiet

- Being inwardly attentive to the divine. We are hushed.
- Stillness turns to listening with alertness and being fully alive.
- Listen with the mind, heart, and spirit—your whole being.

#### c) God may speak

- It is rarely a voice, but a sense, an image, a thought or idea.
- There may be an overwhelming feeling of joy, love, peace or warmth.
- What has been given is not from you or others, but from God!

This type of prayer is often a preparation for Lectio Divina. Others may want to use Centering Prayer throughout the discernment time.

## 2. Lectio Divina Model

The following steps may be helpful in Praying With Scripture or as it has been traditionally called: Lectio Divina:

- ◆ Pick and mark the passage of Scripture you will be using.
- ◆ Find a place that is free from distractions.
- ◆ Sit with a comfortable and relaxed posture. Breathe slowly and deeply.
- ◆ Allow yourself to be present to God. Centering prayer or Listening prayer may be used to help you begin the process.
- ◆ Read or listen to the Scripture read slowly and as if for the first time. As you silently reflect, identify a word or phrase that particularly speaks to you.
- ◆ Read or listen to the same Scripture passage again. Respond in prayer to the word or phrase as you continue silent reflection. Does it bring forth images, emotions, feelings or ideas?
- ◆ Read or listen to the same Scripture passage a third time. Bask in the presence of God. How is God speaking to you as you ponder the gifts of this special person in discernment or how is God speaking to you about the issue related to this discernment?
- ◆ End your time by writing down what you are being called to share with the Discernment Team. Thank God for this time and quietly re-enter the world around you.

### 3. Worship Resource

#### SUGGESTED OPENING WORSHIP

##### **CALL TO WORSHIP:** (Based on Deut. 7:6-8)

Leader: For you are a people holy to the your God;

**PEOPLE: God has chosen us to be god's people out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth.**

Leader: It was not because you were more in number, in faith, in courage or in strength that you were chosen.

**PEOPLE: We were chosen because God loves us.**

**HYMN:** (Preferably one chosen by the Inquirer or Candidate)

##### **UNISON PRAYER:**

Creator and sustainer God, you have chosen us, yet we are not sure we can do what you ask. We find many excuses for not being your people in the way you have called us to be. It is hard for us to believe and accept your love for us as we reflect on all we have done and all we are that is not up to your standards. Help us in this time of discernment: to trust in your holy spirit, to trust that you speak through sisters and brothers in Christ, and to trust that you will speak through each of us. Give us hearts to believe, ears to listen to your still small voice and spirits to respond faithfully. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

**SCRIPTURE:** (Selected by the Inquirer or Candidate)

**PRAYER** – Silent or Spoken for the Person and for God's guidance in discernment.

##### **AFFIRMATION** (in unison)

The spirit of the God is upon us, because we have been appointed to preach good news to the poor. We are sent to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of God!

**HYMN:** (Use the same hymn again or if time is short you may want to move directly to the ending.)

Leader: Go and salt the earth!

**PEOPLE: The grace of Jesus Christ be with us. Amen!**



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