

Volunteers Exploring Vocation Discernment Journal

A Self-Study Resource

for Young Adult Volunteers in Mission



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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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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

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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.)
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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.*

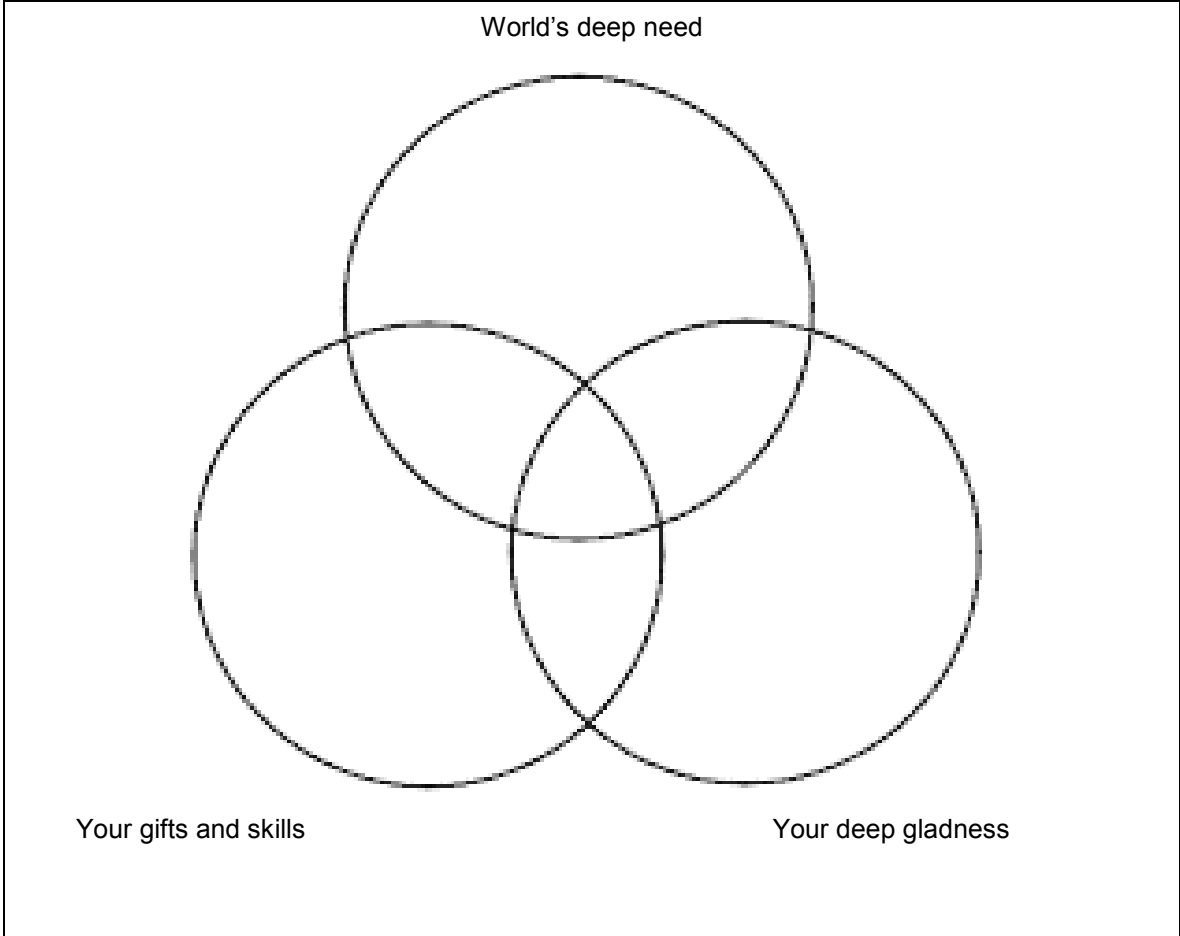
In our society we are pretty good at looking at what makes us glad, joyful, fulfilled. It is a bit harder to look honestly at the world's deep need.

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.