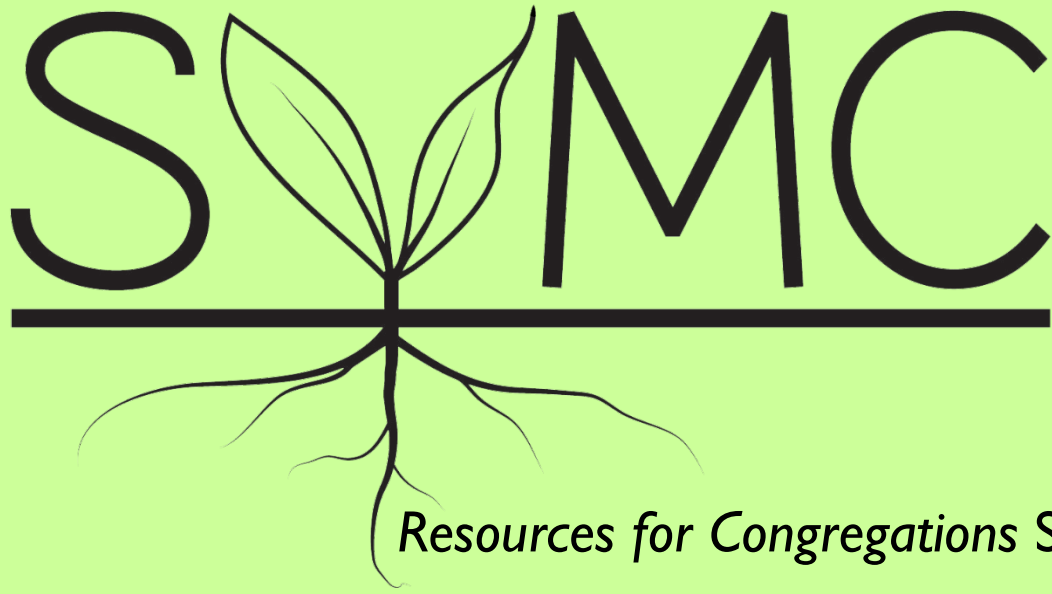




SUSQUEHANNA VALLEY MINISTRY CENTER supports and resources congregations and leaders for ministry in the Church of the Brethren.

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RESOURCES FOR CONGREGATIONS SERIES:
PREPARING TO HEAR GOD'S CALL
BY

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Table of Contents

Introduction	7
How to Use This Study	9
Session 1 – Conditions of the Heart.....	11
Scripture Reflection	12
Resource	13
Practice	15
Discussion	16
Session 2 – Fellowship of Burning Hearts.....	17
Scripture Reflection	19
Resource	21
Practice	23
Discussion	24
Session 3 – Read the Signs.....	25
Scripture Reflection	27
Resource	29
Practices	30
Discussion	31
Session 4 – Practicing Discernment.....	32
Scripture Reflection	33
Resource	35
Practices	38
Discussion	39
What's Next?	40

INTRODUCTION

When we have identified a problem, a significant leadership challenge is to discern how the problem became a problem in the first place so that it can be addressed effectively. As an organization that trains those who sense a call to ministry, the Susquehanna Valley Ministry Center has seen a dramatic decrease in students enrolling in ministry training. How did this problem begin? Is the problem that no one wants to be in pastoral ministry anymore? Or is it that congregations are forgetting their role in calling out the gifts they see in their midst? These may be contributing to the problem, but I do not think they are the root cause of what we are now seeing. I wonder if the source of our problem is actually rooted in our own struggles to hear God's call.

In her book *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*, church consultant Susan Beaumont shares a story about a leadership retreat she led for a congregation learning how to utilize group discernment techniques. Towards the end of what had felt like a fruitful day, one of the leaders pulled Beaumont aside and said, "I am rather embarrassed to ask this, but what exactly is discernment? I have heard this word my whole life in the church and we used it all day here, but no one has ever explained discernment to me in a way that I understand. What am I doing when I discern...?"¹ Beaumont tried to explain discernment to him, but as his puzzled expression lingered, she realized what she was trying to explain was completely foreign to him. She writes, "You see, he had never had a personal

¹ Susan Beaumont. *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in Liminal Season*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 67.

experience of being led by God—not one that he could name.”² This was an unsettling discovery. After similar experiences in subsequent months, Beaumont determined that the church has forgotten how to discern. We may be good at making religious-related decisions, but this isn't the same as being attentive to God and sensing God's purpose.

A large component of faith is the belief that God still speaks, yet many doubt their own ability to hear. So, yes, we have a calling problem in the church today. However, if we cannot trust our own ears to hear God's urging, how can we hope to hear when God is calling us or someone in our congregation into ministry?

This resource is meant to guide a congregation toward a culture of calling by *first* strengthening individual and corporate practices of discernment and noticing God's activity. Only when we have built capacity for listening and discernment in our congregation can we root ourselves in the ability to hear how God is calling leaders in our midst. As we prepare our hearts to hear from God, we can begin to cultivate a culture of calling that will help to sustain our congregations into the future.

² Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, 68.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This study can be used in a variety of ways. A congregation may plan a weekly gathering of individuals interested in the topic, or leaders who make decisions on the congregation's behalf, to go through this study together. A congregation may also decide to do a combined adult Sunday school class or worship series using this study as a launching point. This study also lends itself to a longer devotional time at the beginning of a monthly board meeting. As you consider using this study, think about the regular rhythms of your congregation and how this might fit well into what you already do, or how it might provide a break in routine in a meaningful way.

This study is intentionally meant to be done as a congregation, not for the pastor(s) alone. A pastor, no matter how rooted in the Spirit they are, cannot carry the work of discernment by themselves. This is the work of the people. At the same time, this study balances the spiritual needs of individuals and congregations. A congregation that hears God's Word commits to doing it together but is also made up of individuals who pay attention to God's activity on their own. The activities and reflections move back and forth between the call to discern as individual disciples and the importance of discerning in community.

Note that each session in this study follows a consistent structure, which can be added to and modified to meet a congregation's particular needs. Each session begins with a general introduction to the theme, followed by engagement with a related scripture. Then, the session explores a few practical resources to help individuals and congregations grow in the area being addressed. To further strengthen the concept in the resources, the next section highlights a variety of spiritual disciplines that participants can try. And finally, the session closes with a list of discussion questions for a group to engage in together.

This resource is a first step in a larger journey toward creating a culture of calling in a congregation. After the final session, there are suggestions for where a congregation can go next, as well as a list of works cited and additional resources to be explored. For more resources to support congregational vitality on a variety of topics, please visit www.ETOWN.EDU/SVMC.

SESSION I – CONDITIONS OF THE HEART

*“Many of us are choosing to live lives that do not set us up to pay attention, to notice those places where God is at work and to ask ourselves what these things mean.”
(Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, 62.)*

In her book *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, Ruth Haley Barton argues that many of us live lives that do not make room for God to speak. She writes, “We slide inexorably into a way of life that offers little to no opportunity for paying attention and then wonder why we are not hearing from God when we need God most.”³ We may long for a word from God, but the pace of life we keep leaves no opportunity for God to get a word in edgewise.

Individuals and congregations alike fall prey to this tendency to keep too busy. Congregations often get so busy doing “churchy things,” like meetings, block parties, and fellowship events, that they forget these things do not, in and of themselves, help a congregation be the church. Being busy is not necessarily a sign of a spiritually healthy congregation.

In this session, we will explore various ways to position ourselves so that we more easily notice God’s presence among us. These conditions do not necessarily guarantee that we will effectively discern God’s will, but they make hearing and discernment more likely. These conditions can benefit both individuals and congregations. In fact, for congregations to truly hear God’s will for the whole body, they need to be made up of individuals who are also structuring their lives so that God can be heard.

³ Ruth Haley Barton. *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*. Second Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 62.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

“Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God.” (Exodus 3:1, NRSVue)

Read Exodus 2:11- 3:4.

It may be that Moses encounters God in the burning bush only because his circumstances enabled him to take notice. I find myself wondering if God tried other methods to get Moses's attention before finally connecting with him on Mount Horeb. Did God set other shrubs ablaze, or perform other miraculous signs to draw Moses's attention before finally catching it? And how long was the bush ablaze before Moses took notice? Hours? Months? Years?

We don't know the answers to these questions. However, it seems that conditions were right for Moses to notice that God was seeking an audience with him. Moses grew up in Pharaoh's house. He was likely comfortable, well-fed, and well-educated. Despite what we see in movies, there is no indication in scripture that Moses does not know he is a Hebrew. However, one day, after he has grown, he goes out among his people and sees how poorly they are being treated. After killing an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew, he flees Egypt and finds himself in the land of Midian, shepherding his father-in-law's sheep. Away from the noise and prosperity of Pharaoh's courts, God successfully gets Moses's attention.

The rest of the story is well known. Moses heeds God's call (after arguing with God about whether he is worthy of it) and returns to Egypt to lead the people out of slavery and into the promised land. After his initial interaction with God, we will see Moses continue to make space for moments of solitude. The success of their first meeting at the burning bush roots Moses in both the necessity of making space for God and gives him a clue as to the conditions that make such a connection possible.

RESOURCE

*“God speaks, touches, and reveals in God’s own way and in God’s own time.”
(Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community, 29.)*

The authors of *Listening Heart: Discerning Call in Community* say that certain conditions make the discernment of God’s call more likely. Rooted in each of these conditions is the genuine desire to know God and be pervaded by God’s presence. These conditions of the heart can cultivate an ability to better understand the heart of God over time.

1. Diligent Trust

The most essential condition of the heart when seeking to discern God’s will is trust in God and one another. Trust is something that is built over time. Trust is ultimately faith in the future that is rooted in past experiences. We see this most clearly in moments of lament in scripture. The book of Psalms contains desperate pleas for God to intervene, which we might confuse with a lack of faith. On the contrary, these prayers are rooted in the belief that if the faithful cry out to God, God will indeed respond, even if not immediately. In fact, they have every reason to trust that the same God who brought the Hebrews out of Egypt can intervene again.

2. Prayerful Listening

Prayer is meant to be a conversation, and yet we often spend more time talking than listening when we pray. Even so, the act of prayerful listening is more than not talking. It requires a genuine desire to hear, especially to what we might not want to hear. Listening requires a release of preconceptions so that we do not inadvertently manipulate God’s Word based on our own expectations of how God will speak and what God will say. In scripture, God speaks in sheer silence (1 Kings 19:12) as well as in a raucous whirlwind (Job 38:1). When we expect God to speak only through comfort and consolation, we may miss when God is troubling the water. When we expect God to speak only through fire and condemnation, we may miss God’s call for mercy and forgiveness.

3. Knowledge of Scripture

Even if we struggle to name times when we have encountered God, we are blessed with a record of the developing relationship between God and the people of God. Familiarizing ourselves with scripture and how our faith-ancestors have experienced God helps us know how we can expect God to show up today. Additionally, the Spirit continues to speak living words of wisdom to us through scripture. Individuals and congregations need to spend time in scripture so that the story of what God is doing in the world is also written in their hearts. This helps root discernment in the truth of who God is and what God desires for humanity.

4. Humility

Without humility, we are likely to distort God's Word. Humility is the antidote to both overconfidence and self-doubt. It is not self-deprecating but an honest understanding of what is and what is not ours to do. Humility calls us to interdependence as we recognize our incompleteness. Those who desire humility do not strive for it but come to it through the prayerful recognition that we are small compared to God's greatness.

5. Patience and Urgency

Discernment may be an instantaneous moment of clarity, but it may also be revealed over time and through a variety of experiences. God chooses to speak in a variety of ways because we hear differently, and circumstances necessitate different ways of communicating. We must neither run ahead nor lag behind where God is leading. We wait for God's timing and God's revelation, which requires a balance of patience and a sense of urgency.

6. Perspective

Our ultimate goal is always knowing and loving God. We must not force or strain for discernment, prioritizing it over a relationship with God. If discernment flows out of our genuine desire to grow in a relationship with God, great! If not, all is well. We must hold our desires for answers lightly and release our expectations for an outcome.

Based on "What Conditions Help Discern God's Call"⁴

⁴ Susan Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward. *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*. Revised Edition. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2007), 29-37.

PRACTICE

Choose one spiritual discipline to engage in until the next meeting:

1. Practice the Presence

Choose an activity that you do daily (i.e., wash dishes, walk the dog, drink coffee) and dedicate it to God. Before and after the activity, talk to God. Take notice of God in the midst of this mundane activity.

2. Sacred Listening:

Ask someone to tell you their story and listen deeply. What do you learn about that person? Consider what you learn about God through this person's story.

3. Contemplate Scripture:

Read I Kings 19:11-12 aloud daily. Begin with silence, then read the text three times, contemplating what God might want you to hear from the text.

4. Pray:

Set aside a regular time in your day and engage in a breath prayer. Set a timer for one minute. As you inhale, say "Not my will." As you exhale, say "but yours be done." Reflect on how this regular prayer practice impacts your openness to God's will and timing.

DISCUSSION

Engaging the Scripture

- What is it about Moses' circumstances that enable him to hear God's call?
- How might this experience with God prepare him for a growing relationship with God in the future?

Engaging the Resource

- How have you encountered God in the past that builds trust even as you face an unknown future? How have you built trust as a congregation so that you have confidence in one another even when times get hard?
- How do you know that God is loving, merciful, and wants the best for us?
- Tell a story about a time when you were sure God was speaking to you. What happened? How did you know it was God? How did you respond?
- How does scripture help you understand the heart of God?
- Why is humility essential to discernment?

Engaging the Practice

Share which spiritual discipline you will try and how you plan to engage in it. At the next gathering, you will have a chance to discuss how it went and what you learned.

SESSION 2 – FELLOWSHIP OF BURNING HEARTS

“Spiritual transformation takes place incrementally over time with others in the context of disciplines and practices that open us to God.”
(Ruth Haley Barton, *Life Together in Christ*, 13)

Alexander Mack, the leader of the early Brethren movement, believed that our faith in Christ should be evident “by the manner of our living.” This foundational belief has led to a robust understanding of discipleship in the Church of the Brethren. A unique feature of the Brethren's understanding of discipleship is that it is paired with a high view of the community gathered together in Christ. Brethren believe that disciples of Christ cannot profess faith in Jesus as isolated disciples but are necessarily driven to be a people who grow together into deeper discipleship. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, Brethren believe that we are in the process of “being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18) and that we are made into the body of Christ when we each bring our full selves and various gifts into our faith communities (1 Corinthians 12).

Ruth Haley Barton writes, “One of the reasons Christianity has become irrelevant in our culture is our inability to stay together. Those around us watch all our disagreements, leavings and splittings and see us as no better off than they are.”⁵ This was not always the case. Before the faith community grew to the point that some cities could boast a church on every corner, there was literally nowhere else to turn for an alternative faith community. Barton

⁵ Ruth Haley Barton. *Life Together in Christ: Experiencing Transformation in Community*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 133-134.

continues, “The heart of the matter is that stability—committing oneself to stay faithful to a particular set of relationships—is one aspect of true discipleship.”

In this session, we will explore why a commitment to stability is essential if a congregation is to hear God's Word. Not unlike a marriage, a commitment to be together “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health” invites a congregation to grow together over time. Since true discernment can come as a slow revelation, a congregation that is committed to life together through thick and thin has the benefit of time. Additionally, a congregation that is committed to working through issues learns how to value and relate to diverse perspectives; a significant asset to discerning the fuller revelation of God's Word.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

“They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’” (Luke 24:32, NRSVue)

Read Luke 24:13-35.

The word *stay* appears twice in verse 29, emphasizing that the discipline of staying together determines the story's outcome. The word *stay* is similar to the word *abide*, which is more than a posture of not moving.⁶ It would have been easy for the disciples to be frozen with fear after all they had just witnessed, but that's not what it means to abide. Instead, the two disciples journey together from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a journey that will open them to the presence of Christ because they stay together and journey with Christ.

When the disciples and the unrecognized Jesus arrive in Emmaus, they extend their stay into the evening. And eventually, the revelation that they have been with the risen Jesus causes them to return to Jerusalem to share what they have seen and heard with the disciples there. Each step along the way, the choice to be in the presence of other disciples makes the experience of Christ's presence both possible and meaningful.

The power of the choice to stay in this story allows us to see how Christ is made known in the exceedingly ordinary—a shared meal. This is a reminder that we do not need to go seeking extraordinary experiences to discover the glory of God. In fact, the spiritually mature recognize Christ's presence in all of life. The gift of seeking to know God in community is that more eyes and ears are noticing and paying attention to where Christ is at work. And

⁶ Nouwen, Henri, Michael J Christensen, Rebecca J. Laird. *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 120.

the gift of doing this in community for the long haul is that we develop a history of recognizing Christ together, which is the surest foundation for hearing God's call.

Ruth Haley Barton says that the Emmaus Road experience is an exercise in discernment. She writes, "The issue never was whether Christ was present in all these moments, for he surely was! The issue was whether the disciples had the capacity to recognize him, and *that* was something that developed by God's grace, over time, as they shared the journey together."⁷ As the disciples stayed together, their experience and understanding of Christ changed. First, they understood him as a stranger, then a companion, then a teacher, then a guest, then a host, then the Messiah. Barton continues, "One of the primary functions of transforming community is to be a community of discernment in which we assist one another in noticing and eliminating the obstacles to such seeing."⁸

Even after Jesus left the disciples, they had received an immense gift, what Barton calls "the fellowship of the burning hearts." They experienced what it felt like to recognize the presence of Christ. Their hearts were on fire. Now they would be better prepared to notice Christ's presence and activity in the future. And the fact that they experienced this together seals their bonds as a community transformed by Christ. The church is both the place where Christ's presence is made known and the gift that we are given when we allow our lives to be transformed by him.

⁷ Ruth Haley Barton, *Life Together in Christ*, 141.

⁸ Ruth Haley Barton, *Life Together in Christ*, 141.

RESOURCE

“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”
(Jesus, from John 15:8)

Author Robert Schnase has identified five practices for congregations that cultivate fruitfulness. As a community of faith, our purpose and our mission should reflect our commitment to be Christ's disciples. A congregation that commits to these five practices grows in spiritual maturity and thus is more aware of how they might be used for Christ's purposes.

Radical Hospitality

As Christ welcomes us with radical hospitality, we are called to welcome others so that they, too, can experience the richness of a life in Christ. Churches offer something people need: a community of grace that embodies the love and mercy of God through Jesus Christ. How is the love and mercy of God made known in your congregation? How can you embody the love and mercy of God more fully?

Passionate Worship

The word *worship* is derived from the combination of worth and ascribe. In other words, when we worship, we are declaring that God is worthy of our devotion. To do so passionately is to declare God's worth with eagerness, devotion, and celebration. The form of worship does not matter. It is the genuine desire of the hearts of those who gather to worship that makes worship passionate. Passionate worship breathes life and purpose into a congregation. How does your congregation worship God passionately? What might get in the way of your congregation's participation in passionate worship?

Intentional Faith Development

We are called to grow and mature in our faith together as a congregation. When we participate in faith development outside of weekly worship, we grow in the knowledge and love of God. Learning in community allows for accountability that deepens conviction and commitment. And over time, communities that prioritize faith development have more opportunities to

significantly transform lives because the intentional pursuit of growth opens individuals and communities up to be shaped by God. What faith development opportunities does your congregation offer? How can your congregation transform lives through more intentional faith development?

Risk-Taking Mission and Service

Christ calls his followers to care for “the least of these.” This calling is both spiritual and physical. Following Christ means to invite others to know life that is truly life (1 Timothy 6:17-19), even now, by making an effort to alleviate suffering and injustice in the name of Christ. This calling will inevitably lead us out of our comfort zones and into unexpected places and relationships. As Christ has shown us, to serve others is to do mission *with* and *alongside* others, not *to* others. How does your congregation care for the least of these in your community? How might you partner with others to boldly address the needs present in your community?

Extravagant Generosity

Generosity is not just something we do because it is good. It is a response to the abundance of God's grace and love. We serve an extravagantly generous God. Congregations that wish to honor God also give extravagantly, even if they never see the fruit of the seeds their generosity plants. Practicing extravagant generosity helps us prioritize people over possessions and relegate our money and wealth to their proper place, subservient to God and the purposes of Christ. How does your congregation show God's extravagant generosity through tangible and meaningful giving? How might your congregation grow in its understanding of money and wealth so that its resources are put into God's service?

Based on *Cultivating Fruitfulness*⁹

⁹ Robert Schnase. *Cultivating Fruitfulness: Five Weeks of Prayer and Practices for Congregations*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008).

PRACTICE

Choose one spiritual discipline to engage in until the next meeting:

1. Practice the Presence

If you have something against a brother or sister in the church, first bring that person before God in prayer. Then, go to that person and work to make peace with them. Journal about the experience and what you learn about God's hope for you and the church.

2. Sacred Listening:

Make plans to arrive early or stay late at church events this week and take the extra time to connect with others. Ask how your church family members are, with a genuine desire to hear their answer. Consider what you learn about God through your time connecting with others.

3. Contemplate Scripture:

Read Romans 12:5 aloud daily. Begin with silence, then read the text three times, contemplating what God might want you to hear from the text.

4. Pray:

Set aside a regular time in your day and engage in a breath prayer. Set a timer for one minute. As you inhale, say "I will love others." As you exhale, say "as you love me." Reflect on how this regular prayer practice impacts your relationship with others inside and outside the church.

DISCUSSION

Engaging the Scripture

- In what ways do you think the details of the Emmaus Road story would have changed had each person not chosen to stay in relationship with others?
- How is the community of Jesus' disciples a significant part of the discernment process? How have you experienced this personally?

Engaging the Resource

- Answer the questions asked under each fruitful practice.
- Why is it important to have strong, relational congregations before attempting to hear God's Word?
- Where have you noticed God moving in your congregation? How does that inform your expectation of how God will move in your congregation in the future?

Engaging the Practice

- Share what you learned by engaging the spiritual discipline from the last session.
- Share which new spiritual discipline you will try and how you plan to engage in it.

SESSION 3 – READ THE SIGNS

“God speaks to us all the time and in many ways, but it requires spiritual discernment to hear God’s voice, see what God sees, and read the signs in daily life.”
(Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*, 42)

When my husband and I were getting ready to graduate from seminary, we wanted to be thoughtful and prayerful in discerning where we might go for our first co-pastorate. Knowing that God speaks in a variety of ways, we printed out a list of signs from a book on discernment and taped it to our bathroom mirror. This proved to be a helpful resource as we spent an extended season praying and listening for God’s leading.

In the end, the call came to us not in an instant or in one sign. The clarity of the call came when several signs pointed us in the same direction: advice from mentors, our own excitement, and the call coming from seemingly unrelated places. I believe it was our genuine desire to seek the heart of God and say yes to God’s direction in our lives that enabled us to interpret our experiences as signs that God was speaking.

There is no singular way that God chooses to speak to and guide humanity. Sometimes God speaks by disrupting our lives (i.e., blinding Saul/Paul on his way to Damascus in Acts 9:1-9), and sometimes God speaks by leading us beside still waters and restoring our souls (i.e., Psalm 23). Other times, God’s voice is like thunder (Revelation 14:2), and yet God also speaks discreetly and in stillness (1 Kings 19:12).

This is, on one hand, the great challenge of discernment. Since God can communicate in a variety of ways, we must be ready for almost anything. On the other hand, the fact that God

does communicate through a variety of means is an indicator of God's immense wisdom. The diversity of creation calls for a diversity of communication if we are to truly hear God's Word.

Henri Nouwen reminds us that discernment is faithful living and listening for God's love and direction, becoming "all ears," so that we can fulfill our "individual calling and shared mission."¹⁰ In this session, we will remember that God seeks us and desires to commune with us by considering the signs we see that may indicate God is speaking. God desires to draw near to us. Our call is to turn toward God, who is already in pursuit of us.

¹⁰ Henri Nouwen, *Discernment*. 3-5.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

*“Jesus did this, the first of his signs in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory,
and his disciples believed in him.” (John 2:11)*

Read John 2:1-11.

The word *signs* appears seventeen times in John's Gospel. Signs in John are miracles that are meant to bear witness to Jesus's identity; specifically, that God is at work through Jesus. There are seven signs in John (note that seven is a meaningful number in scripture that implies completion and wholeness).

The signs in John are meant to inspire faith; however, they are met with mixed responses. Sometimes Jesus's signs lead to faith, sometimes they don't. Occasionally, the signs become a stumbling block to genuine faith. Those who seem to respond positively to the signs in John understand that they are not miracles of their own accord, but that they bear witness to God's glory in Jesus as well as specific characteristics of God's work in the world.

Jesus's first sign – turning water into wine – is rich with symbolic meaning. Later, John will compare Jesus to a bridegroom, a significant metaphor for the covenant God wishes to make with humanity through Jesus. Such loving commitment is to be celebrated because it is abundant and overflowing. Additionally, the use of purification jars anticipates the work God will do through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The sign at the wedding in Cana is Jesus's first sign, and the narrator tells us that the disciples believe in him after witnessing it. Willard Swartley says, after this sign, the disciples “wager their future on [Jesus].”¹¹ As we anticipate discerning God's Word through signs, we

¹¹ Willard Swartley. *Believers Church Bible Commentary: John*. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2013), 87.

would do well to remember that we do not seek signs, but there is evidence everywhere that God seeks us and guides us. If deeper faith is what we desire in looking for signs, we will see God's glory all around us. May we not look for signs as proof, but let them lead us to deeper faithfulness and ponder what they teach us about who God is and how God works, in the Spirit, through Jesus, even today.

RESOURCE

“If the radio station is transmitting signals but our radio is not turned on and tuned in, we hear nothing. Moreover, we have to be near the radio and paying attention to actually hear what the broadcast is about.” (Grounded in God, 27)

Authors Suzanne Farnham, Stephanie Hull, and R. Taylor McLean say that discernment is like tuning a radio to the right station, filtering out other voices that fill the airwaves, so that we can hear God's message. They write, “To do this, we have to know some of the signs that God uses and how to interpret them.” While not an all-inclusive list, here are some ways God speaks:

1. God's peace – a deep confidence and sense of well-being that we are headed in the right direction; often born from the hard work of exploration and honesty.
2. Joy and energy – the presence of the Spirit can come with feelings of elation that bring momentum to a certain action.
3. Persistence – when the same message comes from different places and in varied ways, God may be hoping you will take notice.
4. Convergence – while like persistence, this is when messages come over a period of time from seemingly unrelated moments that suddenly converge and make sense.
5. Fruitfulness – when certain actions or choices produce abundant fruit, God may be calling for these places to be further cultivated.

These signs will certainly not all be present in any given circumstance, but this list helps us consider what we are looking for when listening for the voice of God. Sometimes we only see the signs in retrospect, but acknowledging that what we experienced was God's guidance, even if after the fact, helps build trust and capacity for listening in the future.

Based on “*Catching the Signals*”¹²

¹² Suzanne G Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, R. Taylor McLean. *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberation*. Revised Edition. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1996), 27-30.

PRACTICES

Choose one spiritual discipline to engage in until the next meeting:

1. Practice the Presence

Set an hourly timer or a morning, afternoon, and evening timer. When the timer goes off, spend 5 minutes in solitude, in prayer, or reading scripture. Jesus often performed signs when he was interrupted. Journal about what it feels like to be present with God during interruptions in your day.

2. Sacred Listening:

Tell a friend about a time you knew God was active in your life. Then reflect on what it felt like to bear witness to the glory of God as you share your experience with another.

3. Contemplate Scripture:

Read Colossians 3:1-4 aloud daily. Begin with silence, then read the text three times, contemplating what God might want you to hear from the text.

4. Pray:

At the end of each day, engage in a breath prayer reflecting on where you have noticed God throughout the day. Set a timer for one minute. As you inhale, say "You are with me." As you exhale, say "to the very ends of the age." Reflect on how this regular prayer practice teaches you about God.

DISCUSSION

Engaging the Scripture

- What do you learn about God's work through Jesus through the sign Jesus performs at the wedding in Cana?
- What do you learn about God from the other signs in John's Gospel (see 4:46-54; 5:1-18; 6:1-15; 6:16-21; 9:1-41; 11:1-44)?
- How does God communicate through Jesus in different ways through these signs so that a variety of people might hear and understand God's Word?

Engaging the Resource

- Are there other signs that God is guiding you that you have experienced that the authors above did not list?
- Tell a story of a time when you experienced one of these signs and knew that God was guiding and leading you.
- How can you incorporate noticing signs into the regular life of the congregation?
- What do each of these signs teach us about God?
- How might the pursuit of such signs actually be a stumbling block to hearing God's Word?

Engaging the Practice

- Share what you learned by engaging the spiritual discipline from the last session.
- Share which new spiritual discipline you will try and how you plan to engage in it.

SESSION 4 – PRACTICING DISCERNMENT

“Discernment can easily be a polite and pious name for a ‘tyranny of the majority,’ a way of attaching God’s name and authority to what most of the group want, or believe [God] must want.” (Thomas Green, *Weeds Among the Wheat*, 179)

Discernment does take time, but it need not be laborious. If in discernment, we genuinely desire to seek the heart of God, why would we rush it? Discernment is an invitation to be in relationship with God and thus is a spiritual gift. Besides, discernment is something that cannot be manipulated and is only revealed in the fullness of God’s time.

That being said, sometimes decisions need to be made quickly. It takes wisdom to know when an issue warrants discernment or a simpler decision-making process. Susan Beaumont writes, “Decision-making assumes that we have the capacity to understand and solve our own problems and that this works best by maximizing available resources and maintaining order.”¹³ Discernment replaces knowledge with an indifference for everything except the will of God.

Discernment is also something we practice regularly and with grace. In discernment, we seek to put on the mind of Christ, and in so doing, we “engage a discernment process, we strengthen our spiritual muscles and deepen our collective wisdom.”¹⁴ In this session, we will consider what to do once we determine that discernment is necessary and we have prepared our hearts to do so. Since our human nature tends to get in the way, despite our best intentions, it is helpful to develop and utilize a sound process for discernment. A good process recognizes that faithfulness is found just as much in the incremental steps of a journey as in the destination. If our process is broken, then we cannot hope to arrive at faithful discernment.

¹³ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, 71.

¹⁴ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, 76.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

Read Acts 15:1-35.

We often associate the early church with a passion for and clarity of calling, which is certainly true. The early church had a sense of urgency in their faith and evangelism, and every aspect of their lives revolved around their commitment to Christ. We may idealize them for their faithful discipleship, but even they were unable to avoid large-scale conflict over what it means to live as a follower of Christ.

One such debate is laid out in Acts 15. The early church did not agree on what laws and rituals Gentile converts needed to observe. Some taught that all converts, even those who were not born Jewish, also needed follow the laws of Moses. However, Paul and Barnabas argued that such laws as circumcision were an unnecessary burden for Gentile converts. The debate is brought to the council in Jerusalem, where multiple voices and perspectives are heard and considered. In the end, the council determines, through the Holy Spirit, that some laws are not necessary for Gentile converts to observe.

The fact that this debate is preserved for us in scripture is a great gift to the contemporary church. First, it reminds us that conflict in the church is not necessarily a sign of failure. It is the reality of the choice God made to build the body of Christ with imperfect human beings. This does not mean all conflict in the church is good, but it also does not mean that all conflict is inevitably bad. Conflict is just our reality, and we can work our way through it if we are committed to discerning our way through it together.

Additionally, this debate is an example of collective discernment. While much of the details of their deliberation is left out of the narrative, we do know a few key characteristics of

their process. Throughout their discernment, they search for God's wisdom in scripture, in multiple voices, in their tradition, and in the movement of the Spirit. After a healthy debate, the decision is made "with the consent of the whole church" (15:22). When the decision is shared via letter, the council reports that the decision was reached unanimously, because it "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (15:28).

God is invited into the council's deliberation. Thus, the debate itself is informed by God's will, and the outcome will ultimately allow the unhindered spread of the gospel. The council's wisdom continues as they choose to send a delegation to the community in Antioch to help interpret the council's response. The discernment process not only draws the community close to God, but to one another, seeking to be in right relationships with each other. Discernment that prioritizes relationship with God and one another honors the Greatest Commandment and is a litmus test for a healthy discernment process.

RESOURCE

“The process at first seems cumbersome and painstakingly slow, but when honored, it fosters rich dialogue. With time and practice, discerners settle into natural discernment rhythms, eventually developing a practice that is seamless and elegant.”

(Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, 82)

Susan Beaumont recommends the following as a good process for group discernment. These steps are not necessarily meant to be done in sequence but are more fluid and flexible. Some steps may be quick, while others take time. Embedded in each step of the discernment process is the desire to know the heart of God and to listen for God's call together.

Framing

Although this may seem intuitive, the first step in the discernment process is to frame the discernment topic. This often comes in the form of an open-ended question. A congregation that wonders how God would have them engage their community could frame their discernment in several ways.

- What are the needs in our community that we can meet?
- Who are the people in our community doing God's work that we could support?
- How are we called to share the gospel in our neighborhood?

Even though each of these questions mentions engaging the neighborhood as a congregation, each question highlights a different aspect of community engagement – meeting needs, partnering, and evangelism. Identifying the discernment question takes time, but it is an essential step in the process if a group hopes to discern together.

Grounding

Discernment requires boundaries; places an organization is not willing to go. These boundaries are called guiding principles that ground a group in who and whose they are. These boundaries do not need to be expressed in the negative (thou shalt not), but are often more positively communicated through scripture, core values, and mission. These grounding principles may already exist in a congregation and should be used to root the church in its identity and purpose.

Shedding

Shedding invites us to name what we need to lay aside, individually and corporately, if we are to focus on God's will. Shedding can also be called faithful indifference. In the discernment process, faithful indifference calls one to be deeply committed to the topic but release control over the outcome. Shedding is done as a discernment process begins, so that individuals and groups can identify how their ego may get in the way of the process. However, shedding is never complete and will likely need to be reengaged at various points throughout the process.

Listening

While listening is a consistent part of the discernment process, there is also a listening phase of the discernment process in which the group listens to the voices and wisdom of those most impacted by the discernment topic. This phase may involve informal conversations or more formal information-gathering tools like surveys, interviews, and meetings. At the end of the listening phase, the group must consider what they learn from what they heard. The data a group receives in the listening phase informs discernment. It cannot tell the group what to do.

Exploring

At this point in the process, the group explores possible directions that address their discerning theme and are rooted in their guiding principles. The challenge in this phase is to limit the options on the table to only those that are viable and address the discernment topic, while avoiding preference toward a single direction.

Weighing

With various options on the table, the group weighs each option. There are a variety of tools available to help a group weigh each direction. Susan Beuamont suggests two options that are based in biblical and theological principles:

1. Biblical Theological Reflection: Each participant is asked to consider a biblical story that feels relevant to the discernment topic. Considering the perspectives of the characters in the passage, they evaluate the options, including the lessons these characters learned in scripture.
2. Consolation/Desolation: Inspired by Ignatian understandings of consolation and desolation, participants are asked to prayerfully consider how the options lead them toward consolation

(feelings of inspiration, restoration, balance, energy, and towards community) or desolation (drained, cut off from community, giving up important values).

Choosing

After weighing the options, the group should check to see if there is consensus; a commitment to a particular decision that the group believes is best. If consensus is not reached, the group may decide to go back to the exploring or weighing steps. It is possible that the group needs time to prayerfully consider the options. The group may also decide that they were asking the wrong questions and need to start over. This is not a failure; it is a sign of wisdom.

Testing

This step is often neglected in traditional decision-making processes. The group tests the direction they have discerned together by resting. The group is asked to consider their hearts and if they are truly pursuing God's will. After a time of rest, the group reassembles and determines if they can faithfully support the decision moving forward.

Based on "Deeping Group Discernment."¹⁵

¹⁵ Susan Beaumont. *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*: 83-90.

PRACTICES

Choose one spiritual discipline to engage in until the next meeting:

1. Practice the Presence

When you end up waiting (in line, in traffic, on hold, etc.), use the extra time to pray instead of giving in to frustration and impatience. Journal about the experience and reflect on what you notice about yourself and about God as you wait.

2. Sacred Listening:

Reach out to a friend or companion who is anticipating an unknown future. Listen to their fears, anxieties, and even their excitement. Offer to pray with and for them as they consider their journey.

3. Contemplate Scripture:

Read Psalm 139:23-24 aloud daily. Begin with silence, then read the text three times, contemplating what God might want you to hear from the text.

4. Pray:

At the beginning of each day, engage in a breath prayer. Set a timer for one minute. As you inhale, say, "In the morning when I rise." As you exhale, say "give me Jesus." Reflect on how this regular prayer practice orients the desires of your heart throughout the day.

DISCUSSION

Engaging the Scripture

- What qualities of healthy discernment do you see in Acts 15? What would identify as proof that the Holy Spirit is present as the early church works through conflict?
- What does the way the early church handles the debate over Gentile converts teach us about God's hope for the church?

Engaging the Resource

- How is this discernment process different from a traditional decision-making process?
- What types of issues would benefit from a discernment process? What types of issues would benefit from a decision-making process?
- Which of these steps are present in Acts 15?
- If your congregation were to use the discernment process for relevant issues, what effect would this have on your community?
- What might you learn about God by using the discernment process?

Engaging the Practice

- Share what you learned by engaging the spiritual discipline from the last session.
- Share which new spiritual discipline you will try and how you plan to engage in it. You may choose to meet one additional time to share your experience with the spiritual discipline you engaged in this time.

WHAT'S NEXT?

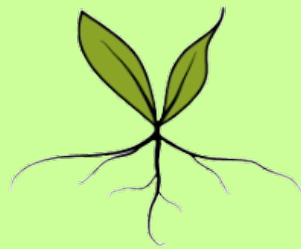
We are on a journey of deepening spirituality and faithfulness. As you consider where you, as individuals or as a congregation, should go next, here are a few suggestions:

1. Explore one of the resources listed on the next page together for further study.
2. Further develop ideas for congregational life and vitality that have arisen during this study.
3. Reflect together on the Brethren understanding of the “Priesthood of all believers” as you consider doing the work of God together. View the following recorded sessions, led by Denise Kettering Lane, Associate Professor of Brethren Studies at Bethany Theological Seminary:
 - a. Priesthood of all Believers Session 1 (September 11, 2023):
<https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/hTSnwgIFXqta2Flh2k9INQVUe85-cvhdPaRcUCmQQwo65saFJ2t6lGEQS5QvJl9.9mbJBjcehLPudx8E> (Passcode: LtV^Tf22)
 - b. Priesthood of all Believers Session 2 (September 18, 2023):
https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/rfh32U-6lViTVD9utFI0ZiX64_iTfG36cao0aQxnNv5KK0YgIK5QnWHjgTiV0-5W.7A3Pg884xU04Vv-L (Passcode: Et03PN+0)
 - c. Priesthood of all Believers Session 3 (September 25, 2023)
:https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/aS5kOyAE2skfhKjj49dNGOHNk4PfKm2a4PPfnjFBpfNuPq0vrRNEjldwk5vnAAQHh.hIQYbdABA6mtxy4c (Passcode: #ywd#e+6)
4. Seek out spiritual direction, individually or as a group. For more information on Brethren spiritual directors, visit <https://www.brethren.org/dlf/spiritualdirection/>.
5. Participate in a study to identify the spiritual gifts present within your congregation. A great resource that considers gifts from a Brethren perspective, called “Community of Gifts,” can be found here: <https://www.brethren.org/dlf/spiritual-gifts/>.
6. Pay attention to what God is doing in your midst and share what you hear and see with others.

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